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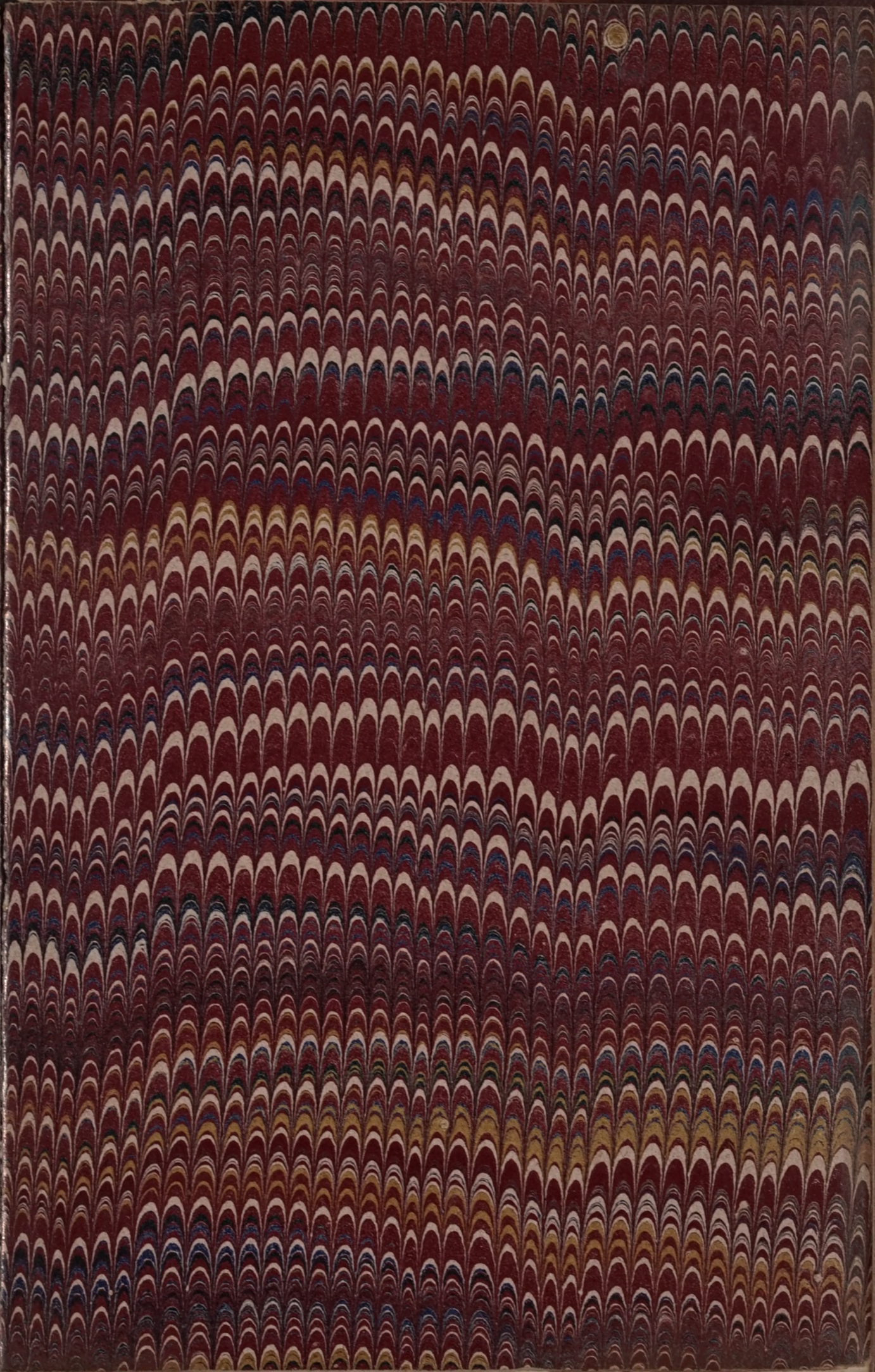
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# THE HOUSE TERRIBLE

BY  
AUSBURN TOWNER

*Author of "Half a Million Acres," "Seven Days  
in a Pullman Car," "Chedayne of Lotono,"  
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BY

AUSBURN TOWNER

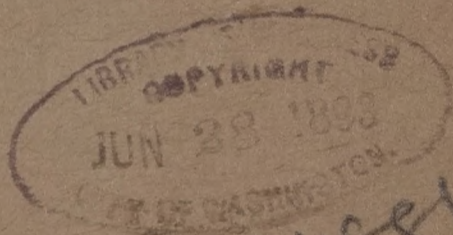
Author of "Half a Million Acres," "Seven Days in a Pullman Car," "Chedayne of Kotonno," etc., etc.

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# THE HOUSE TERRIBLE.

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## RETROSPECTIVE.

ONE of the sightliest spots in the valley.

A considerable rise from the general level, with a plateau at the summit, of twenty or thirty acres. In the center of this plateau a circular mound made with great regularity and precision, its ridge or top a foot or fifteen inches high, in shape and size singularly like those rings that traveling circuses leave in the fields where lads and young men subsequently go to disport themselves. So symmetrical, smoothly graded and regular are plateau and circle that both and all are attributed to a civilization of such immeasurable antiquity, even back of the Assyrian and Chaldean, that it would make our Hengist and Horsa modern characters. But it should be remembered that natural forces sometimes, in perhaps a freak or by way of showing of what they are capable, construct out of rocks, trees, bushes and earth a landscape, a view or a glen that it would be the despair of art to equal or imitate.

From the center of the circular mound the view



on all sides is one of graceful, picturesque variety and peace. The sky line of the hills far to the east, west and south is one of wave-like symmetry, peculiar to the valley from its source to where its river sweeps into the bay. To the north, for a score or more of miles, the view is unimpeded, the wide plain extending to the shores of the lake. But for this plateau the valley is here one wide expanse of almost flat country, gaining for itself and keeping the name of the "Great Plains," fruitful and prolific with the accumulated richness of soil of ages upon ages.

Incidents dim and shadowy float and circle about this plateau, misty and uncertain as are all things that depend for their life on legend and tradition and the mere breath of man; things that have not been made clear, certain and everlasting by the types.

In the haze of the past that seems to sweep up from the river, clinging to the trees and gathering about the hilltops, see! Sitting closely together about the circular mound a group of men, shadowy at first, but becoming more and more distinct as we look. Silent and grim they sit, with heads uncovered, but wrapped to their eyes in their deer, wolf, bear or fox skins. The same sun is lighting up the eastern sky that looks down upon us now, but the measure of the number of times that it has since looked into the valley from those eastern hills



no man can calculate. In the center of the group a naked figure standing, but bound hand and foot. There is no fear expressed in his face and his eyes are bright and defiant.

The sun having risen, so also rises from the circular group the most venerable of them all. Brief is his story, his manner slow and dignified, emphatic but without show of feeling or passion.

“I tell the story of falsehood and treachery,” he says. “Not of individual toward individual, but of one toward many: A speck, a crumb in the way of a mass. The son of our foremost chief and prince; elevated by his birth and blood above his fellows; living from a child in an atmosphere of honor and purity and in line to succeed a father who has come down to us from an unstained ancestry reaching hundreds of years back into the past. Our reliance, our hope, our stay. We are attacked by our hereditary foes from the south. They come stealing upon us in numbers that we cannot count. We prepare to meet them, gathering our warriors from their lodges and hunting-grounds to defend ourselves and make a stand against them. In the darkness of a moonless and starless night our foes fall upon us in the rear, approaching us through a dangerous and little-known pass in the southern hills. We may have been unprepared, but we were neither surprised nor unprotected. Our fighting men quickly form and repel the attack so success-



fully that not one of our enemies is left to carry the tale of their disaster back to their own country. Who led our enemies through this dangerous pass? Who pointed their footsteps with such unerring precision toward our rear? He whom I have already described, if not named. It is not his fault that our people were not destroyed or sent into distant lands, and our hunting hills and fishing waters handed over to our enemies. He has given himself up. He is here. Behold him! Face to face, eye to eye and breast to breast a brave man meets his enemy and fears not. A foe in your own household, an enemy that smiles in your face, disarms you with pleasant words and reaching around stabs you in the back. You cannot meet, you cannot make yourself ready for an assault by a weapon in the hands of a friend. It is worse than trying to strike at shadows in a mist. You are defenseless. Truth, honor, faithfulness, loyalty are to be prized, commended, clung to eternally; held up as the most precious qualities of man. Treachery is to be hated, condemned, punished. Our ancestors left us these lessons. Let us teach them in as sharp and unmistakable a manner to our posterity."

The venerable man sat down. While he had been speaking, a younger member of the circle glared at him as though he would devour him with his eyes. At the conclusion of the speech he rose with so much haste and in such a disturbed de-



meanor, unusual as such actions were, that, with knitted brows, the eyes of all the others held him with dissatisfaction if not a little aversion.

“No treachery!” he exclaimed, speaking rapidly and passionately. “It was a plan that he himself had formed to rid us of our enemies. The risk was his own. The danger was great. He went among them as a renegade from us, with smooth stories of our unjust and cruel treatment of him and his hatred and contempt for the people of his fathers! They believed him; they trusted him. He withdrew the strongest and bravest of our fighting men from our advance and placed them in our rear, giving orders to keep up a ceaseless watch for his return. He did lead our enemies through a little-known pass in the hills, but he led them to their utter destruction. No treachery, but sublime bravery and a demonstrated willingness for his own self-sacrifice if the result should so demand!” The young man sat down.

All eyes were turned toward the figure in the center of the circle, but he was silent, with his face still defiant.

Then presently, one by one, each of the occupants of the circle arose and passed down from the mound into the shadows of the trees all about its foot.

The defiant figure knew what the movement meant.



Next morning, when the sun again looked into the valley, it lit up a tall, graceful pine spar, stripped of its branches and bark, and rising more than fifty feet in the air from the exact center of the circular mound where it was firmly planted. At its top was affixed a ghastly object, a human head, the long black hair just lifted by the morning breeze and the eyes and face still bearing that look of defiance they bore but yesterday. At its foot was a mound of freshly turned earth.

Down from the ages to us has come the name of this spot, clinging to it still, in the liquid language of the race, "Kanaweola"; in the vulgar language of the day, "Head-on-a-pole." But the lesson accompanying it is not one to excite an aversion to treachery so much as a hatred for ingratitude and injustice.

Again, and to closer times, for many yet living have looked upon and talked with those who took part in the scene.

On that same hillock and on that same circular mound on the summit thereof are sitting another group of men, but they are all bound, hand and foot, with cruel, cutting withes about their wrists and ankles. They are white men, too, sturdy and vigorous-looking, but thinly clad and with piteously expectant expressions on their faces. Not so much of fear as of uncertainty and doubt. Swarthy men—



whom it would be a satire to call "warriors," unless with a similar indiscrimination we apply that term as we give the epithet "noble" to the lion of the desert—swarthy men, in all kinds of dress and undress, are standing or moving about on the exterior of the circle where sit all the doomed captives, many inflamed with liquor, some exultant, with loud talk, noisy, quarrelsome, brawling and offensive, and all evidently expectant of some momentous event.

Slowly there comes from the valley, up the mound and toward the circle, making its way through the throng, which is somewhat stilled and quieted by the approach, a figure, human in likeness only because it walks upright. There may have been a time when this thing was young and bright-eyed, hopeful and happy, with life and health before it, susceptible of yielding joy to its companions and filling its environment with a loving kindness for all, but now—!

Bent, withered, decrepit, bony and uncleanly, with a few wisps of scraggy hair bleached to a snowy whiteness flying about the head, the face a mass of wrinkles and the color of old parchment. Only the eyes, deep-set under the eyebrows, seem to have any remaining life or animation in them. They glow like an arc light shining in a cavern, with a restless intensity vividly maniacal. With difficulty, if not with pain, she slowly limps toward



the circle, bearing in her right hand a murderous-looking bludgeon, shaped out of stone into a rude resemblance to a hatchet, having a short hickory handle; and as she comes, there is a compelled, savage deference paid to her.

The eyes turn with horror, the heart stops beating for an instant, drawing all the blood to itself, at the recollection of the well-authenticated actions of this demon, as she shuffles noiselessly behind—mark you, behind!—each helpless victim in the circle, and, with a shriek that, in its sublime fury, would have aroused the envy of the ruling inmates of the lowest pit, she raises her arm and strikes—!

There is one gleam of sunshine that lights up this gloom, and it has shed its ray down to our own times. One in the circle, princely in bearing, although bound, having the face of a nobleman and the eye of an eagle, watches the demon, as in her bloody work she approaches toward where he sits. There are but three captives left between her bludgeon and his life. He has been able to loosen the withes upon his wrists, and so far, unperceived, has removed them from his ankles. There is one chance for him in a thousand. He takes it. One more shriek from the demon and he springs to his feet, showing the athletic form of a man standing three inches more than six feet in height. With a leap, born of despair and nurtured



by hope, he springs away from the circular mound. The drunken, noisy crowd is paralyzed by his temerity. With childish thoughtlessness, no precautions had been taken to guard against such an attempt. Death behind him, life before him, across the plateau he flies and disappears down the decline before any pursuit is attempted or thought of. He gains the thick forest close at hand, and is free ! His woodman's craft and cunning developed by his life in the new country, and founded on reason, are more than a match for the mere instinct of his pursuers. In after years he relates the incident to his descendants of the third and fourth generations and points out to them the spot of his daring and successful break for life.

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## CHAPTER I.

### “ DANDYLION ” AND VIOLET.

A LAD sat fishing one spring afternoon from the banks of a wide river.

There was a great bend in the stream there and the swift current hugged the opposite shore, while where the boy sat there was a great cove or bay in which the water was deep and as quiet as though it lay in a roadside pond.

There was nothing attractive about the boy,



except his evident intentness on the business in hand, which was well measured in its effect, by three fine bass that lay close by his side on the bank, strung upon a forked twig, their bright scales glittering in the sunlight, and every now and then a muscular shudder or shiver of their bodies showing that they had not been long from the water.

The intense quiet of the place would have been the delight of any fisherman, suggesting great sport and a large catch, except there was something about it that gave the impression of a loneliness that was a little oppressive. In any direction that you might look the eye was met by tall and wide-spreading trees, whose size indicated that they had stood there for ages and helped to make up the primeval forest. Nowhere could be seen a sign of the habitations of men or of civilized life. It was all wild, untamed, but beautiful nature.

The lad was ragged, barefooted, unkempt and careless of apparel, with an expression, or perhaps no expression, on his face that was peculiar, but he looked fresh and clean, and the state of his sandy hair was a sure indication that before getting down to the serious business of the afternoon he had taken a swim in the water, not so much for cleansing purposes as for the exhilaration afforded by diving, floating and exercising himself in the inviting waves.



From another point of view he was peculiar, being very profusely decorated with dandelions. They were thrust in around his clothing and hair wherever there was an opportunity for them to cling and a great bunch of them was tied to his waist. He touched them once in a while to straighten them out or change their positions with an action that was somewhat similar in character to that which a lady would employ who smooths down or arranges on her wrists or about her neck the costliest laces.

There was another strange thing. On the left leg of the lad, on the firm, sun-burned flesh, just below the knee, one could see—for the trousers hardly reached to the knee, and below the leg was bare—the mark of a dandelion, as distinct and clear as though it had been photographed there, stem, petal and calyx—everything except the color.

He sat there as dumb and motionless as a Sphinx, intently watching his “bob,” when he was touched on the shoulder by a small hand which remained where it had been put.

He was not startled, nor did he remove his gaze from his “bob,” only muttering something that sounded like “Mum-mum-mum-brurr-mum.”

It was a girl of about his own age that stood by his side, resting her hand on his shoulder. Her approach had been so silent that hardly a leaf had been disturbed by her coming. No one, unless look-



ing at her, could have told of her approach or her presence.

It was easy to see who and what she was. Her dead black hair, straight and wild, hanging loosely from her head and reaching just below her shoulders; her cheek-bones, raised just enough above the height to which the European eye is accustomed to be noticeable, and her swarthy skin, told the story of her race. She, as was the boy, was barefooted and bareheaded, although she carried in her hand a nondescript garment that might have been a hood or a bonnet. Her dress was only a gown reaching just below her knees, and was evidently, from the wool itself, of home-made manufacture, originally intended for and worn by an older person. Nevertheless, with all these things against her, she formed no ungraceful picture as she stood with her hand resting on the lad's shoulder. There was a dignity in her posture and in the carriage of her head, a sad and somewhat melancholy expression in her face, that gave her a mature, even aged appearance not at all borne out by her evident youth. She presently took her hand from the boy's shoulder and gently laid it on his sandy locks.

"Poor Dandy!" she said, as she smoothed down the rough hair, much as one would caress a favorite dog. "Poor Dandy!"

The lad shook his head a little impatiently and muttered as he had done before.



“He don’t know what I want to do for him,” she continued. “He can’t understand. Poor fellow!”

The “bob” went down with a sudden jerk, the boy sprang to his feet, eased up his line a little, and then, with a rapid swing of his pole, landed another good-sized bass by the side of those already strung. The two sat down on the bank, while the boy took the fish from his hook. Then he looked up at his companion. It was enough to stamp him for what he was. It was a vacant, meaningless stare, with only sufficient intelligence in it to indicate that he recognized her.

“Dandy,” said the girl, “she’s hit me ag’in, and I’m goin’ away.” She spoke as though the blow to which she referred had struck her feelings, hurting them more than it had injured her physically.

“Do you understand, Dandy?” she presently added, pointing as she spoke toward the western hills. “I’m goin’ away to be with my own folks. I’ve bin lookin’ for you all the afternoon to tell you. Do you understand, Dandy?”

Dandy only stared hard at her for a moment, with a grin on his lips, looking for an instant in the direction she had pointed, and then he began to bait his hook again. She took hold of his arm.

“Can’t you hear me a minit?” she pleaded. “You’re the only friend I’ve got in the world.



You've stood between me and her hand many and many a time. You've given me somethin' to eat when I've been hungry, and you've given me clothes when I was cold. I'll tell you somethin', Dandy." She bent her head toward his ear. So you have seen a child filled with grief or overcome with sorrow or disappointment pour out its feelings to a favorite cat or dog, or some inanimate object like a doll or a piece of wood, and with just about as much of a response. "Dandy," said the girl, scarcely above a whisper, "all these woods and hills, this river and this creek belong to me. My father has said so and my father never told lies. When I get to be a big woman I shall know how to get them. And when I do, Dandy, when I do!" She stopped speaking and took from the bosom of her dress a small roll, something about four inches long, like in size and appearance to a bunch of paper lamp-lighters or a thin and much worn strip of sheepskin folded tightly, and tied about the middle with a leathern string, whose two ends went about her neck and were fastened together there. "Look here, Dandy," she said, earnestly. "Look at this. This is what will give it all to me. My father gave it to me and it has never left my neck since he tied it there."

Dandy's attention had been attracted. He stepped close to his companion that he might take the roll in his hand, rubbed it between his fingers,



smelled of it with a sniff and raised his eyes. His look went over her shoulder directed down the stream and fixed itself in the distance. The vacant stare gave place to a frightened, almost wild expression and his arms were raised in the air as though he was warding off some impending danger, while a jumble of sounds, impossible to indicate in writing and of no intelligible character, came from his mouth. He flung his arms about, pointing at length with them both down the stream.

The girl, startled at first at the vehement actions of the lad, turned and looked. Just where the bend in the river began a large boat was appearing in sight, making its slow way up the stream, being laboriously poled along by two men, one at the bow and another at the stern.

The lad looked for only a minute more. He was trembling with excitement. He seized his pole, line and fish, and sprang, with a cry hardly of human significance, from the bank, dashed toward the woods and was immediately lost to sight.

The girl watched longer with intense interest. She saw that the boat was heavily laden and made very slow progress. Now and then, as the trees would permit, she saw besides, trudging along on the banks of the stream, others that undoubtedly belonged with the men in the boat. There were three or four women, several children, and in front of them, a number of cows, several horses, two or



three pigs and some chickens and ducks. "Will they never stop coming?" the girl murmured to herself with a wistful look. "They come by twos and threes and tens. Will they never stop?"

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## CHAPTER II.

### BUNNS AND BUTTONS.

THE boat slowly swung around the bend in the river and floated toward the quiet waters of the cove, more and more out of the influence of the current, requiring less force to impel it forward and moving with increasing rapidity. The persons on foot presently reached the spot where the young girl was standing, stopping before her and regarding her with interest if not with a little curiosity. She returned their gaze unmoved and without embarrassment. The little children of the party were the first to approach her with friendly intent in their actions. They tried to touch her and reached out their hands for the purpose, but she shrank from them, drawing her scant skirt closer about her. She was the first to speak, addressing herself to one of the women who seemed to be the eldest of the party.

"What do you come here for?" she asked, following out the train of thought that was in her mind.



The woman, for reply, only laughed lightly; but one of the children took up the answer and pertly said: "To live. What d'ye s'pose?"

"The country is full of you now," pursued the girl. "Hardly a day passes that some new ones do not show themselves, and up at the P'int the houses are gettin' thicker'n trees, and the new folks are swarmin' like bees. I can't see what brings 'em."

The woman laughed again, and replying only to the first words of the girl, exclaimed: "Full of us! Why, for miles and miles we have traveled without seein' a human bein' or any sign of human life. The sight of you is welcome to us, showin' that we are not in a wilderness. Does any one live around here? What's your name?" The whole party had by this time gathered about the girl, who was watching them cautiously and with not very welcoming eyes. Presently, however, she said:

"My father called me Alita, which, in your language, means a wild flower or a violet. That is my name here. She calls me that sometimes, but mostly, as do the others, only Vile!" Then, not only the woman, but all the others with her, laughed.

"Yes," continued the girl, "that's what they all do, when they speak my name or hear it spoken in that way," turning to go as she spoke.

"But you haven't told us if any one lives around here," the woman said.



Alita stopped and looked at the whole group with melancholy contempt. "Haven't I told you," she cried, "that the country is full of you?"

"It doesn't look it," said the woman.

"Close by here," the girl continued, "is Cap'n Burket and his family, a little ways off the Gris-sels, Highmans, Galatians, Macomers and the Quicks. They are before you come to the P'int, and there, I couldn't tell you how many there are—"

A great shouting here interrupted the girl, coming from the forest into which the lad had plunged, and by this time, too, the boat had reached a point nearly opposite to that on the bank where they stood. In a moment or two more the lad himself appeared among the trees, flying toward them with his arms outstretched and his mouth uttering indescribable sounds. Close behind him, also running as well as the trees would permit, came two or three men, several well-grown boys, an eager dog, and, still behind them all, four women.

The lad stood on the bank pointing eagerly toward the boat, while his face was turned to the foremost of the men that followed him. This one was bony, stoop-shouldered, muscular and hard as to his physical characteristics, with a melancholy cast of countenance that looked solemnly wise beyond his apparent opportunities. The contrast between his appearance and the cheery, welcoming tone of his voice was marked as he called out:



“Pull in! Pull in! Tarry for the night.”

The men on the boat looked and did not hesitate a moment in making response. They headed toward the shore and in a few minutes their keel grated against the bank. In a few minutes more they themselves stood upon the land, and there was a general handshaking all around. The women had already become acquainted, and were chattering among themselves as if they had known each other for as many years as they had minutes.

The heartiness of the welcome was equaled by the frankness with which the invitation to stop was accepted. To the one party, the coming of the strangers and immigrants was like the arrival on an island far removed from the centers of civilization, of a company fresh from the outer world, bringing with them tidings of what was there going on. To the strangers and immigrants it was like meeting friends in an unknown and untried land. Each was hungry for the other. Each could give to the other what he most desired to know.

“We’re from the Jarseys,” the elder of the strangers said, “and I’m Abraham Button. These are all my family and my belongings. We follow my elder brother into these regions, where I’m told land is cheap and the sile kind.”

“Your elder brother?” questioningly and rather musingly replied he who had welcomed the



stranger. "I, too, follered my elder brother here. Poor old Isaac! He died broken-hearted." This with a sigh and a downward look with his eyes.

He had a peculiar habit, noticeable on half an hour's acquaintance with him, of stopping and slowly shaking his head, while a still more melancholy shadow than ever gathered in his face. It was as though some thought continually recurred to him, too big or indistinct for utterance or too important or sacred to be ignored. It came instantly and departed with equal rapidity.

Presently he looked up again and asked: "Button? Button? Not Absalom Button?"

The stranger nodded his head.

"I know him well," the man went on. "He lives only about fifteen miles toward the lake, in the valley of the Horse's Heads."

"The what?" asked the stranger. "That sounds like a name out of the 'Pilgrim's Progress.'"

The man laughed. "No doubt it sounds strange to your ears, but we are used to it. When the first settlers came into that region they found a great quantity of horse's heads there, some scattered about, but mostly piled in heaps. The Indians never had any horses. On inquiry it was found that the general who made his famous raid into this region some twenty years ago, not having the wherewithal to care for and keep his horses and



having worked them beyond endurance, considered it only merciful to kill a large number of them, leaving their bones to bleach in the valley. This much we are told by some of his soldiers, who returned after the war and settled in the neighborhood. It is easy to speak of the locality and to identify and describe it in the way I have described it. It is a name that is fastened to the spot and will probably forever cling to it. I hope so. Now as for me, I am Obed Bunn. This is my family and my dog. I came here from Buryilk ten years ago. I have a clearing not many rods from here, and I'm glad to welcome you to Diahoga County. The more that comes, the better and the merrier."

There came loud and impatient cries from the boat, and all eyes were turned in that direction. There was a deep, heavy voice and a weak, thin one, and both seemed to be uttering the same words. They were profane words mostly, making inquiry as to the cause of the stoppage and as to the probable time when the journey would continue.

"Hi!" cried Abraham Button. "What's the matter down there? Who's boat is this?"

At the stern of the boat had been fashioned a low awning with short curtains all around it. These were being violently shaken, and presently a leg in tightly fitting black trousers was protruded therefrom and toward the bank. Its mate imme-



diately followed, and then the figure of a very slender man with a very pale face emerged and stood upon the ground.

"The devil himself!" ejaculated Obed Bunn. "Jephthah Karkle!" The melancholy shadow gathered on his face for an instant, his eyes again sought the ground, and his hands were tightly clasped as he muttered under his breath: "If I could only be sure. If I could only be sure!" Then, looking up and addressing Button, he added: "You don't travel in the best of company, I should say."

"They pay well, anyhow," was Button's rejoinder, "and I have to look out for my dollars."

"They?" Bunn asked. "Who's the other one?"

Button straightened himself up with some pride, as one will who is giving important information, and answered: "Colonel Brentford Atwater, and he's come to buy up this whole valley if he likes it."

"Um! Um!" muttered Bunn. "What's Colonel Atwater, a lawyer?"

Button nodded, saying also: "So I was told."

"Lawyer!" sneered Bunn. "We don't want him here. Karkle's a lawyer, and there's enough on 'em up to the P'int now. They're no good. If he was a carpenter or blacksmith or tanner and currier or shoemaker or hatter or tailor, he'd be



more'n welcome. But lawyer, pish!" only the last word was a more emphatic one.

"Yes, but he's got money," argued Button.

"No doubt," replied Bunn; "else Jephthah Karkle wouldn't be anywhere around him."

"I was told in Buryilk," continued Button, "that Atwater had a trunk full of gold which he had left in the bank there; that he was coming here now with Karkle to commence building a house, the contract for which had been made with a man by the name of Cameron Catlin—"

"Cam. Cat, the carpenter? Good! I'm glad of it. He's one of the best of fellows living, turning a hand for any one who may need him, with one of the prettiest women in the valley for a wife and three fine children. I hope the house is a big one, and that there'll be money in it for him. Do you remember having heard whereabouts it's to be?"

"No. Only in what was told me there was much said of the Great Plains and the Mound."

Obed Bunn shook his head in rather a doubtful manner, but vouchsafed no reason for such suggestive action.

"You see," continued Button, "Colonel Atwater came out with that expedition here twenty years ago of which you spoke, and he picked out this valley as the land of promise. Anything the matter with it that makes you shake your head?"



“Not much,” said Bunn, emerging from his dubious condition. “You can raise anything here that grows. I’ve seen cornstalks in this valley sixteen feet high and you can buy land at eighteen pence the acre!”

“Well, what is it, then?” pursued Button. “Ain’t there any land left to take up?”

“Left?” retorted Bunn. “Up near the Great Plains, beyond the Mound, there are acres on acres that have not even yet been looked at, but you don’t know who owns it.”

All this time the slender man, Jephthah Karkle, had been assisting to alight from the boat a very large individual, who, with short legs, was having as much trouble for a place on which to rest his feet as did the dove that was first sent from the Ark.

He couldn’t see at all where he was going by reason of the low curtains and awning, and he seemed afraid to thrust his legs over far enough to insure his feet touching the ground. The group on the bank looking, laughed long and loud at the spectacle presented of two stout legs in boots and knee-breeches, the rest of the body being hidden by the curtain, waving helplessly over the side of the boat. There were grunts and groans and oaths within as a running accompaniment to the futile efforts.

Jephthah Karkle was unable to help physically,



and could only give a moral support by crying, in his thin, piping voice: "Just a little further, colonel. A little further. One inch more and you'll have it."

But the inch couldn't be made.

Abraham Button, watching the scene, finally ran down to the boat, and, reaching underneath the curtains, with stalwart arms seized the man by the shoulders and pulled him with a sudden and impatient jerk to the land, so sudden that it would not have been surprising if he had left the head behind.

With a great oath, Colonel Atwater straightened and shook himself and looked around. He was very large, in height and rotundity, with an impressive face, deep black hair and eyebrows, and cold, forbidding black eyes. Notwithstanding his size, when he finally got firmly on his feet he moved readily and actively, with a self-assured and self-conscious air that only fell a little short of being pompous with an innate sense of superiority manifest over his surroundings.

"That was like being born again," he said, with a voice that sounded as if it came somewhere from far underground. "What you got here?" he asked, presently, as he looked about him and up upon the bank. "This is not the P'int, Karkle."

This last expression was flung at the slender man as though it had been shot from a Krupp gun,



and startled that individual so that for an instant he trembled.

Karkle had some peculiar actions at all times that were as disagreeable as was the expression of his face. His hands seemed never to be still. They were in his pockets one moment, behind his back the next, tipping his hat forward or backward or to the side the next, unbuttoning the lower button of his vest the next, or buttoning or unbuttoning his coat the next. He scratched his nose, one of his ears, or took off his hat to scratch his head ; he pulled at his cuffs, laid his finger against his nose or caressed his chin with his thumb. Restless, restless hands—as though he must constantly occupy them or they would get into something with which they had no business.

“You’re right, colonel,” he said, presently. “This is not the P’int, but it’s precious near to it. It’s less than half a mile away.”

“What do we stop here for then ?” the colonel inquired, petulantly. “If it’s so near, let’s go on afoot.”

He had his answer from the bank above. Dandylion stood there waving his hand toward them, and Violet came down the bank, and speaking to Button, said : “She says they are all ready for you now.”

Colonel Atwater seemed somewhat impressed by Violet. He looked at her long and earnestly,



and as he looked seemed to be studying out some problem in his mind. Presently in the deepest tones of his voice, which greatly disturbed her, he asked: "Who's she, and I'd like to know what it is that is ready?"

"Mrs. Bunn—" began Violet, but shrinking from the colonel's steady gaze she said no more, flying up the bank and away from the reach of his cold black eyes.

"Bunn?" the colonel muttered, looking toward Karkle, and then he added, quickly: "Come, Jephthah, let's get on."

But Karkle had pulled him by the sleeve and in his thin voice, that was little above a whisper, answered: "Better hadn't. No use offending them. They have the Bible idea of a stranger in these out-of-the-way spots. Every one's as good as every one else here. Better make friends than enemies at the start. They might be suspicious and lay it up against you. *I stay.*"

And so did the colonel.

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### CHAPTER III.

#### COLONEL BRENTFORD ATWATER.

THE others of both parties had been very busy. The men and boys had brought from the boat a large piece of sailcloth and with some poles and



ropes had set up a rude but comfortable tent, and had also brought up the bank a large chest, which Mrs. Button had watched with some solicitude until it was safely lodged under the tent close by her side. A number of rough pine benches were also brought from the boat and set near the chest. Very quickly a brisk fire was burning a little way off, and over it, on forked sticks braced against each other, a kettle hung that was not long in giving evidence of having a song ready for them.

It was a conspiracy of the women to introduce into the valley for the first time an institution that has held its own among the social functions of the locality for nigh on to a century—a “tea-party.” Mrs. Button, in the course of getting acquainted with her new-found friends, had perhaps inadvertently admitted that she had a quantity of a prime “Old Hyson” in her chest. The intimation was all that was needed. The article there was literally worth its weight in gold. She had, too, some white bread and Jersey butter. What more was needed?

The men came near by and into the tent. Instinct informed them, helped by their noses, what was in the wind. They set the example that has been industriously followed ever since, refusing to unite in an adoration of the Chinese herb and designating the gathering as contemptuously as they knew how by the term “Tea-fight,” a term that



is not heard now, however, with the frequency that it was heard a quarter of a century or more ago.

These men had a more powerful, if not a better, excuse for their actions than could probably be advanced by those who imitated them in after years. Abraham Button smelled what was going on and sniffed up his nose, not with disapproval, but with more or less contempt. He attracted the attention of Colonel Atwater with a touch and winked at Obed Bunn. These three quitted the tent, followed by the rest of the men.

They found the trunk of a fallen tree near at hand, and sat in a row upon it. Abraham Button left them there for a few minutes, and going to the boat, returned at length with a large black bottle that in shape resembled a colossal pumpkin-seed.

"This is no common corn," he said, handling the bottle tenderly. "It is pure rye. It is Jarsey manufacture." Little did he think that in after years the epithet he applied would identify a liquid of such ferocious character that the name of the fire from heaven must needs be added to it also, to accurately describe its strength and force.

They were innocent and unsuspecting in those early days in new countries, especially where "fire-water" was concerned, and these men sat upon that fallen tree, victims of the man from the "Jarseys." While the women of the two families were quietly and with entire propriety sipping the



drink from their old "chany" dishes that "cheers but does not inebriate," the men without much ceremony were swallowing in great gulps the drink that seldom fails to inebriate even if given only half a chance.

Abraham Button elevated the pumpkin-seed bottle to his mouth first, to certify to the purity and excellence of its contents, and then handing it to Colonel Atwater, he turned his back on him. In this way he went the length of the fallen tree, and then rested from his labors. Presently he repeated his journey, and again rested from his labors. Thus in this wise, at lengthening intervals, until at the last he reversed the bottle, and one lone drop, with a regretful movement, trickled from the mouth and fell to the ground.

During the hour or more of this symposium the women of the two parties sitting underneath the tent rehearsed family histories, and the newcomers were fully informed as to the lives, characteristics, family faults, failings and virtues of all those who were already in the valley and among whom the strangers had come to cast their future lots and lives.

As to the men on the fallen tree, experience and observation, extending for ages, from the time of Noah to the latest date in the calendar, will inform one as to what they did. The effect of "Jersey lightning" or other milder form of spirituous drink



in repeated and continuous application can be pretty accurately measured. Most of them, after the exhilaration, tumbled off the fallen tree upon the soft earth and fell asleep, some lying there until the morning, it being impossible to awaken or arouse them, while others crept under the cover of the tent and slept away their joy. All of the women retired to the comfortable log house of Obed Bunn, only a few rods away, and in the morning had an early breakfast prepared, so toothsome and attractive that it was evident they harbored no resentment toward the men for their "doin's."

The words and actions of Colonel Brentford Atwater, in an advanced stage of the proceedings, were peculiar, evidencing that something of more than ordinary importance to him was uppermost in his mind. They had the effect, too, of attracting "Vile" to him, who watched him intently and listened so eagerly that her eyes seemed to be protruding from her head in her effort to understand him.

It was even before the bottle had been reversed. "We did it, Karkl'," the colonel mumbled—"didn't we?" He had his arm around Karkle's neck, and that person, at the words, solemnly shook his head, trying to hold up one hand, in an imbecile, warning way. "Got 'em all," continued the colonel, paying no attention to Karkle's signs.



“Wha’s mil’try titles got do wis us?—’r Injun, either? We’re too smar’ for’m. Shillin’ acre!” Then he seemed to think a moment, bursting forth at length with the exclamation: “Such mansion! Biggest and hand-hands’mest whole country. Biggern Van Rens-rems-rems-ler, or Liv-viv-ving-ston. Overlook whole valley. Pride o’ valley. Thousand acres ’round it! Right center Mound. Castle! Ren-nice-nice-ance—” He hardly completed the last word, and his deep voice, harsher with its thickened utterance, came forth with a sound like that which a cannon-ball would make rolled swiftly over loose boards laid on the water. He tried to rise to expand himself with the strength of his emotions and anticipations, but the effort was too much for him. He fell backward from the fallen tree, carrying Karkle with him, and they lay there in a heap, their heels in the air.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### WHERE THE HOUSE WAS BUILT.

“KIUGA POINT,” or, as the settlers and inhabitants of the neighborhood called it, “The P’int,” lay at the junction of two considerable streams of water of nearly equal size, although one was called



the "Diahoga River" and the other "Kiuga Creek." The river, bursting through a gorge to the far west, swept across the middle of the valley and was turned southward by the eastern hills, where it was met by the creek coming from the north. Just across the creek to the east the hills began their graceful rise to their rounded summits; to the west and north the level lands spread for miles toward the Great Plains and the lake, and across the river to the south lay the broad flats that extended to the hills far away, looking, in the distance, blue and shadowy.

Just at the Point, there was a considerable cluster of houses, mostly of log, but built carefully with the joints matched and the interstices between them filled in with clay. There was the "store," having not a very large assortment of goods, but such as were mostly needed by new settlers. It belonged to Colonel, but the more generally called "Grin'stone" Beckwith, from the fact that in the pictorial single-entry book-keeping of the day he had charged a farmer customer with what looked like a cheese, but which on the trial of the lawsuit for collecting the balance of account turned out to be a grindstone, the hole for the axle having been omitted in the drawing! Back of this store, on the edge of the high bank of the river, was a large storehouse, its size required, for here were kept, as Joseph kept the



grain for the Egyptians, the produce of the settlers with which they paid for the supplies from the store. Little if any money passed. It was a very scarce article. The farmers gave so much grain, so much butter, so much cheese, for so much tea or sugar or coffee, an ax or a saw or a plow. And the grain, butter or cheese were stored away until the spring or fall freshets provided a highway for arks laden with these products to float down to their only market, many miles to the south.

On the west bank of the creek ran what could hardly be called a road, more properly a wide path, being the trail left by the little army that some twenty years before had been sent into the region to punish the Indians; and how they did punish them, burning their villages and destroying acres on acres of corn, gardens and fruit trees of all kinds without number and without mercy! The trail led toward the lake, through the valley of the Horse's Heads; was still well marked and to this day bears the name of the general of the army. Half a mile or so from the Point, up this trail was another cluster of houses surrounding a large, two-story log building that was dignified by the name of the "Court House," for the Point early in its existence had become a half-shire town. This was a strong, stout building, two stories in height, with a basement. In the basement dwelt the under-



sheriff with his family. In the first story was the courtroom, which was used on Sundays and on the evenings of certain days in the week by one of the religious societies of the valley. The second story, hardly more than an attic, was a mysterious place, where, when the moon was full, a company of men gathered from all the country round for the performance of certain ancient and mystic rites that kept the lads of the village far from the scene at all times, and especially on the night of the meeting. It was said of them that these rites were not entirely disconnected with a fierce black goat and a red-hot gridiron ! It is not known that any one ever attempted to disabuse their minds of this belief, until they became old enough to satisfy their curiosity in regard to the matter.

Up along the north bank of the river from the Point ran another path for half a mile or so toward the Great Plains. There, was another cluster of log houses, with another store and storehouse, a blacksmith shop and a saddler's. The people of this cluster of houses prided themselves greatly on having here, also, a tavern, a ferry across the river, a doctor, two lawyers two frame houses, and, on a little rise by the side of the road, a school-house ! In this latter-named building another religious society held its services on Sunday and on certain evenings of the week.

There were two sawmills on the bank of the



creek, and there was a rumor that Colonel Beckwith was soon to erect a "gristmill" near by his store, at the junction of the two streams where water power could readily be obtained. The rumor was hailed with delight; for the nearest mill was thirty miles away, and the settlements had no communication with the outer world except that afforded by the river that ran toward Buryilk, a considerable place in a long settled region one hundred or more miles south, or by a mere horsepath in the woods leading in the same direction.

They were shut out of and off from the world at large, so far away that when the knowledge of startling events that make history contemporary with them came to their ears they were ancient tales. They had voted for Adams and Jefferson and Burr, but inauguration day had almost arrived before they knew who was to be their President.

Into such a community the arrival of a man like Colonel Brentford Atwater was an event. Jephthah Karkle lost no time in spreading abroad the intelligence of the trunk full of solid money that lay in the bank at Buryilk; of the great things that the colonel contemplated doing for the Point; of the immense quantity of land he had bought and of the house he intended to build immediately.

Colonel Brentford Atwater himself very quickly ingratiated himself with the inhabitants. He lived for a time at Jephthah Karkle's, who occupied



one of the two frame houses in the upper settlement, but finally took up his quarters at the tavern, where he could come oftener into intimate contact with the people. He was very polite and impressive on the street or anywhere out of doors, never meeting any one without stopping, taking off his hat and saying in his deep voice :

“Good-day, sir,” or “madam,” as the case might be. To men, he always advanced with hand extended. To women, he seldom neglected to add some words relating to his wife. “Mrs. Atwater and you will be great friends when she comes on here to live,” was his most usual expression. “Estimable woman she. Her father the master of a sea-going vessel, her grandfather an officer in the navy; most of her ancestors, sailors. Ahoy! there, my lad!”

At the tavern, too, in the evening, there was always to be found a group of men in the large public room, which was a barroom as well; and there the colonel always found interested listeners. He was fresh from the outer world; indeed, he was not slow in letting it be known that not many months before he had crossed the Atlantic from the Old World! It was almost, to the settlers, like the personal presence of one from another planet. It may be added, also, that he emphasized the liking that grew up for him by frequent orders in behalf of his hearers for a supply from the



variety presented by the bar. "And," said Caleb Ordway, the landlord, with a contented and satisfied smile, "he always pays with money!"

In entirely opposite directions the colonel's influence and efforts were not wanting.

One who had already gained the soubriquet of "Aunty" Skerrett, from her readiness to help her neighbors in distress of any kind, and whose heart was full of loving-kindness, was an earnest laborer for the church. She and her husband, who was a great horseman, with her brood of boys, some seven in number, had in a few years transformed a large patch of ground into a rich and prolific garden. "It is like the old place at home," she said, referring to a spot of ground in the north of Ireland, whither the family, it was rumored, had been driven by some political disturbance that rendered the husband liable to arrest.

They certainly couldn't have found a more retired and secluded spot in which to have hidden themselves.

Aunty Skerrett had the earliest vegetables to be found in the valley and had introduced there many unknown to the other settlers, French peas, lima beans and the succulent cucumber. And the berries that grew on her bushes! They were all worthy of prizes, if such things had been known. All she lacked was a market, to have made her fortune.



"I like to see them grow, anyhow," she said, and she only made a living out of her labors, with something over for her beloved church. She sold or bartered much of her produce for clothes for herself and her children, and supplies from the "store," but largely of what she raised went to the sick and the poor.

Aunty Skerrett had secured the services of a clergyman, stationed some thirty miles away, to come every other Sunday to the Point and read service in the little schoolhouse, and with some little help from other church people as earnest as herself, had managed to pay him. If she had had only a little more money, the church would have a real beginning at the Point and a clergyman all to itself.

Aunty Skerrett had only to ask Colonel Brentford Atwater once. The "little more" three times over was forthcoming, or at least promised, and the Rev. Howard Cantine was installed the rector of the church. He was an exceedingly prepossessing young man. Tall and slender, with blue eyes and brown hair. In his canonicals, he was the ideal minister. He read the service with earnestness and meaning, and his sermons were thoughtful, sincere, eloquent and convincing.

"We'll all be church people, here at the P'int," said Aunty Skerrett, when she saw how full the little schoolhouse was when Mr. Cantine preached.



“And we’ll have a little church to ourselves soon.”

The Rev. Howard Cantine came to the Point with his wife, who was an invalid, and daughter, and room was found for them at the house of Cameron Catlin, whose wife was Aunty Skerrett’s only daughter.

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## CHAPTER V.

### BEGINNING THE WORK.

BUT it was not for these things that Colonel Brentford Atwater had come to make his home at the Point. They were mere episodes.

He and Jephthah Karkle had been very busy ever since their arrival. Sometimes Cameron Catlin had been with them. The location of the new house had long before been decided upon. It was at the center of the summit of the Mound within what seemed to be the remains of a circular elevation of some inches above the general level of the plateau. Here were also found the remains of a small log cabin.

It was no very easy matter to secure workmen and implements in the sparsely settled country for the necessary grading and excavations. But money, ready cash, even in a desert will perform wonders. Horses and plows were there, and



wagons, picks, shovels, scrapers and wheelbarrows were brought up in boats from Buryilk. Men were almost as scarce, but money drew them also.

Colonel Atwater, Jephthah Karkle and Cameron Catlin walked over the plateau many times, settling upon the situation, the elevation and the general plan, and considering the view and the outlook in every direction. How should they know that in every expedition of this nature, from a tall oak tree just at the foot of one side of the Mound, whose top reached far above the level, and whose thick branches and leaves hid the observers, four eyes were looking at and watching them closely? Or perhaps better, two eyes alone, for the other two had not much speculation in them. The first two were bright, black and glittering, and had an intensity of hatred in them that indicated how their owner would like to have annihilated the three men with their glances. There were small hands that were stoutly clenched, short, thin lips closely pressed together and a half-clad figure that trembled with feelings for which there was no utterance possible.

The other two eyes glanced from the men in the broad field toward the figure near them and then back again at the men, unable to understand what it was all about, and muttering some words, or rather sounds, that no one could understand and that were certainly in no known language.



Once the half-clad figure seized its companion fiercely by the arm and cried : " Dandy ! Dandy ! They're going to take it all away from me and claim it as their own ! What shall I do ? What shall I do ? "

This was not uttered plaintively nor with any melancholy intonation, but in a fierce, bitter tone, as though she who had uttered it was ready for a fight to protect herself and what she thought were her rights.

For a little while longer the fierce eyes watched the three men as they stood in the center of the plateau turning this way and that and pointing with their fingers in this and that direction. Then the half-clad figure began to clamber down from the treetop, crying to its companion : " Come down, Dandy ! come down ! I know what I shall do ! "

In a few minutes the three men on the plateau, with some curiosity, saw coming up from the decline into the valley two children, a girl leading, with her long, loosened black hair flying in the wind behind her as she ran, and, following, a lad, vainly trying to keep up with her.

As they came closer Jephthah Karkle, having set his hat on the back of his head and buttoned and unbuttoned the bottom of his vest, said, quickly :

" Well, well ! Of all things ! Here's Obed



Bunn's two curiosities—Isaac, the idiot, and Vile, the Indian girl. They always travel together and one of them knows about as much as the other ! ”

He stooped and picked up a pebble as he spoke, flung it at a distance, scratched his ear and turned to look in another direction.

The two children stopped in front of the men, the girl calm to all appearance, although having been running at no slight speed, and the boy utterly out of breath. Colonel Atwater bent his gaze on Vile with an interest so unmistakable that before she spoke she hesitated somewhat.

Addressing him, however, she at length asked : “ Are you going to take this mound and the land ? ” The incident seemed so curious and unusual and the question came so unexpected that no one replied. “ Take care ! take care ! ” continued Vile, in a moment, and the whole was so inharmonious as to be striking, the figure and the voice so childish and immature, the attitude and manner so commanding, the face so stern and the eyes so bright. “ Take care that you do not take what cannot belong to you. It's mine. All mine. My father said so, and my father never told lies. ”

Colonel Atwater made a little movement as though the words had somewhat startled him, while Karkle whirled around and burst into a loud fit of laughter.

“ What idiotic nonsense is this ? ” he exclaimed.



“Child’s play that their warped minds have concocted !”

With the delivery of the message Vile seemed to have satisfied herself, for as soon as she had concluded she turned, and, grasping Dandy by the hand, fled across the plateau and down its decline. For the rest of that day Colonel Atwater was much abstracted and thoughtful for him.

In the evening, at the tavern, Karkle related the incident with sufficient exaggeration to make it amusing rather than otherwise, and it passed into the gossip of the settlements to be forgotten for the present, only to be revived with exaggerations not amusing many years thereafter.

And so, under the direction of Cameron Catlin, the work was begun and carried forward. The plows ran merrily through the soil, and the scrapers took it up to help level and properly grade the surroundings. It attracted the attention of the neighbors, and was almost as good as a newspaper to them ; for no day passed that many of them did not visit the locality to see how matters were going on. It was an undertaking vast in comparison in the valley, and one that had not been expected so soon.

And no day passed that Vile, sometimes alone, oftener accompanied by Dandy, did not come also to look at the work. She sat just on the edge of the plateau facing the workmen, her knees drawn



up to her chin, her hands holding her head, and her eyes watching every movement and every load of earth drawn up from the excavation. She was oblivious to everything except the work that was going on. It was well that on one day Dandy was close at her side. It was growing late in the afternoon, the sun being just upon the point of setting, when just at the foot of the decline where she sat appeared the figure of a rather stalwart female.

“Ah! There’s where she’s spending her time, is it?” muttered the female. “And leaving all her work undone. I’ll teach her who’s mistress this time and whether she’s going to be fed and clothed for just nothing at all.”

She crept quietly and cautiously up the incline toward the children. She would have surprised Vile, but quicker ears than hers caught the sound of some one coming and an instinct told Dandy that danger was at hand. He did not move, however. He must have felt, for he could not have seen when the woman was close behind them. He could not have seen, but he felt, indeed, when the blow from her broad hand, aimed at Vile, was delivered. He had sprung to his feet and caught it square on the side of his head. It was so sharp and vigorous that it took him off his feet and sent him rolling down the hill, but as he fell he uttered a sharp cry, not of pain, for he seemed to disdain



that, but one that Vile knew was a warning of danger.

Two rather surprised persons stood there for an instant facing each other, and the one most surprised was not Vile, who had sprung to her feet. Several of the workmen near at hand who had observed the entertainment seemed overcome with glee at the outcome, and made it quite manifest. This nettled Mrs. Bunn, and she viciously reached her hand out toward Vile. The girl moved back, but the woman's fingers had caught in a leather string that was hanging loosely about the girl's neck; the movement pulled it taut, so taut that a red streak speedily appeared in the flesh where it had lain. The little roll also flew out from the girl's dress and fell into Mrs. Bunn's hands.

"What's this? What's that?" said the woman, handling the little roll with curiosity in her eyes, as she pulled the girl toward her, holding tightly on to the string and by means of it securing her a prisoner.

The girl's heart sank within her, lest her treasure should be taken from her; but her manner did not betray her feelings. She was as stoically calm as though the matter did not interest her at all.

"That's nothing," she said. "Only the only doll I ever had, and I carry her always near my heart. Poor baby!" she continued, trying to



caress the roll as it lay in Mrs. Bunn's hand. "Poor baby! I suppose you want to take that away from me, too," she added, shortly, reaching behind her neck, as though she would untie the string that held it.

The woman looked down sharply. "Yah!" she cried. "Take the nasty thing and come home. We'll see about it when I get you there." She dropped the little roll from her hand with a jerk that deepened and brightened the red streak about the neck, and Vile sprang quickly out of her reach, hiding the roll again in the bosom of her dress.

By this time Dandy had recovered himself, and, rubbing the side of his head where the vigorous hand had stopped in its fell descent, had come up the decline and stood looking first at one and then at the other of the two.

One of the men standing just at the edge of the excavation shouted to them: "Come here." As he did so, the other workmen could be seen scrambling hurriedly up the embankment, some of them looking backward over their shoulders.

Mrs. Bunn and the two children, forgetting their own desires and situation in the vigorous actions of the men, went quickly toward them. The sun had gone down and the excavation was deep enough to look dark and gloomy. The men who had come up pointed down to a spot below where their horses were still standing before the



plows. Even in the dusk there could be seen in the freshly opened furrow white objects that looked like large balls and other white objects shaped like sticks or short billets of wood. The men were all evidently very much agitated, if not frightened.

“No matter, I guess I’ll go down and tell Catlin myself,” said the one who had called out first, and he started off rapidly. He looked back several times and saw that the other workmen waited listlessly around for only a few moments, and then all one after another, leaving their horses and tools in the excavation, were following him down the decline toward the settlement.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### THE BUILDER.

PERHAPS there was no man in the valley or any valley quite so deeply interested and bound up in his work as Cameron Catlin, “Cam. Cat.,” as he was generally called, for he was of that genial, inviting temperament and habit that takes easiest to a familiar nickname. Besides, in these primitive days, so close did each one live to all the rest, so near were they to each other in hardships, toil and sport, that few were known by their legal patronymics. It was not an evidence of disrespect, nor undue familiarity, but of closeness to each other that was



almost of the nature of a family tie. Catlin was a carpenter and builder by trade and was proud of it. Coming from the far east, six or eight years before, with some little ready money in his possession, he had drifted to the Point and found himself the only carpenter in the neighborhood. His hands and his time were full at once, and with the expectation of only staying there a few weeks, he had remained all these years, had married there Alice Skerrett, had built himself a home, was the father of three very bright little children, and had a constant and profitable demand on his time and labor.

Of course, Colonel Atwater had fixed upon him from the start for the builder of his house, being pleased with his plans and the absorbing interest he at once manifested in the "job." To Catlin had been delegated the duty of getting out all of the necessary timber at the sawmill and taking charge of the work in its general management as well as in its detail, from digging the cellar to making and putting in the doors and the window sash. He had himself gone down on horseback to Buryilk, to get workmen, and in the rear of his lot they had put up a rude shop where all of the woodwork of the structure had been for some time in process of construction.

From Catlin himself had come the idea so pleasing to Colonel Atwater that he adopted it with



gratification at its suggestion, to build the house of stone. Not cut stone, nor stone in square and shapely blocks, but ordinary stones of sufficient size picked up from the field in which the house was to stand. The novel and peculiar idea would serve a double purpose. The field would be gleaned of a rather profuse but unprofitable crop, and the slight expense of gathering and preparing them would materially lessen the cost of the building. Those to be used could be selected with care, as regards their shape, color and size, and being laid in mortar in regular and uniform rows, would present an appearance pleasing to the eye, of a novel character, as firm as the hills and as warm and comfortable in the winter as though each side was one solid mass. It would, too, have a look in harmony with its surroundings, rugged and sturdy and not lacking in a certain stateliness even when the locality should become more thickly settled.

Colonel Atwater, Jephthah Karkle and Catlin himself were all in Catlin's parlor this evening going over their plans and making calculations of the various things needed and their cost. Mrs. Catlin had just brought in candles when there came a knock at the outer door, the person knocking being so eager to enter that he turned the latch and stood in the hall as Mrs. Catlin came from the parlor to answer the summons. "Is Mr. Catlin here?" he asked, almost out of breath.



Catlin heard the voice and called out : " Is that you, Sam ? Come in," and as the man hastily entered, he added : " Why, what's the matter ? " The question was a natural one, for the man stood with fear in his white face and limbs trembling.

" Come out to the house," said Sam. All the workmen already called it " The House."

" Well, that's singular," said Catlin, " when I've just come from there. What's the matter ? "

" We've struck a graveyard I guess, boss," muttered Sam. " The cellar's full of dead men's bones ! "

Colonel Atwater and Karkle turned at this and faced the man. The colonel looked a little disturbed, while Karkle, with a laugh that sounded more like a shudder, asked : " Are they any different from live men's bones ? "

" All right," said Catlin. " Save 'em all up and we'll bury 'em elsewhere."

" Some old Indian roosting-place, no doubt," added Karkle. " The soil ought to be rich around about there, colonel."

" Never mind," pursued Catlin. " We'll attend to it in the morning. It'll be all right."

" But—" Sam began to argue.

" No matter," interrupted Catlin. " You needn't have come to tell me this to-night. We'l' fix it all in the morning."

" I don't bl'eeve you can, boss," pursued Sam.



"The men have all left the cellar, leaving the horses and all the tools there."

"Well, that beats it," exclaimed Catlin, and both the colonel and Karkle muttered something full of "m's" and "n's."

"And you can bet you won't get them back there again this night, if ever," concluded Sam, with considerable emphasis.

"The horses must be looked after, anyhow," said Catlin, rather impatiently, as he rose. "I suppose you'll go with me, Sam, and help bring them in?"

"Y-e-e-s," replied Sam, rather hesitatingly.

"Shall Karkle and I go with you?" asked the colonel. But before Catlin could reply, Karkle had arisen and seized his hat, twisting and fingering it nervously.

"I've stayed longer than I ought now," he said. "Court sets here next week, and I've got some pleadings to prepare that should have been done to-day."

Both the colonel and Catlin laughed at this limping excuse, and the latter said: "No need for you to go, colonel. I think that Sam and I can manage the two teams easily enough, and we can leave the tools there. I hardly think that dead men's bones will have any use for plows and picks."

"Well," said the colonel, "stop at the tavern



when you come back and let me know about it.” Then he and Karkle left the house together.

In a few moments afterward Catlin and Sam were trudging along the rough path toward the Mound, Catlin carrying a lantern.

It had grown quite dark and there were few if any stars visible, the heavens being overspread with clouds.

No one knows what the “uncomfortable dark” is, as a child would call it, who has not been in the extreme country of a night that is moonless and starless. Of all lonely, dismal and desolate situations this is the chief, combining the two most terrorizing elements of which the heart of man can conceive, absolute stillness and complete absence of light. Take away your sense of sight and your sense of hearing and how little remains to provide for your safety and how much to magnify and intensify your fears.

The lantern that Catlin carried was but a hollow tin cylinder punctured with holes not much larger than those an ordinary-sized pin would make, through which struggled the dim and uncertain light of a short tallow candle.

It was almost two miles from Catlin’s house to the Mound and the way was rough, now through a thicket of scrub oak, then through a great clump of large trees and again through a forest of pine saplings. There was a slight wind, and as they



passed the leaves overhead had a different tone, none of them soothing and composing, but all shrill and disturbing.

They arrived finally at the Mound, climbed its incline and stood at the edge of the excavation. It was too dark to see within it, but they knew where the road had been left, up which the wagons came with the earth. Down this they went, stumbling over the loose stones and chunks of earth that always litter an unfinished excavation. Sam knew where the horses had been left and they had no difficulty in making their way to them. The lantern shed a little glimmer around them, but it was very faint, making the remainder of the place the darker for itself.

"Here," said Catlin, "you hold the lantern so I can see and I'll unhitch the horses from the plows." He reached the lantern toward Sam as he spoke, but that individual was literally rooted to the spot on which he stood. With the energy of an uncontrollable terror he roughly grasped Catlin's arm and in a ghastly whisper said: "Look there!" pointing with his other hand toward the corner a few rods away from them.

As with about all actions founded on fright, this one of Sam's was attended with disastrous consequences. The grasp had been so nervously vigorous that the lantern was jerked from Catlin's hand, fell to the ground with a clatter, its door



flew open, the candle dropped out and was extinguished the moment it touched the ground.

Some philosophers contend that fright is contagious, and others that its exhibition arouses contempt and pugnacity in the one who witnesses it, whatever may be its moving cause.

Under the circumstances Catlin was excusable for the sudden leap his heart gave and the strange feeling of laxity about the muscles of his knees. He looked toward the corner where Sam had indicated. There was certainly something moving there. He could tell it because, although the darkness was intense, almost impenetrable, there was something more solid than the atmosphere there in motion. In spots, too, in the corner, there were little glints of light, shooting up in gleams no larger than a fine needle, and then dying away into little glows like the points of similar needles. Sam was shivering and clinging to him, absolutely terror-stricken and helpless, paralyzed from fright.

Two practical thoughts came into the mind of Catlin. One was that he must get Sam away from there somehow or he'd have a dead man on his hands, and the other, that calmed him most, that the horses ought to be taken home and stabled. Sam could never tell, and Catlin hardly knew how he in the pitch darkness, with a something unknown and terrifying in the corner only a rod or two away from him, unhitched the horses



and mounting them rode recklessly away up out of that cellar. In it all, they never turned their backs to the corner, and their last recollection of the unpleasant spot that night was the sound like a sob or a sigh or a moan, which in the state of their minds might have been the singing of the wind that they had heard in the trees.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### CONTINUING THE WORK.

THE forbidding and grewsome find by no means stopped or hindered the work. Catlin sneered at such a notion, Karkle laughed at it and Colonel Atwater wouldn't hear to such a thing for a moment. The bright sunlight of the next day banished much, if not all, of the apprehensions that had been excited and enlarged by the deep shadows of the night. The bones of the dead have less to make the heart beat quicker about them when the daylight is abroad than when the night surrounds them and mayhap makes their phosphorescent glimmer visible. But Sam Tyler never recovered from the experience of the night, in one sense. The tale was told on him as long as he lived, and he was called from it "Bony Tyler" for so many years.



that his proper baptismal name was almost forgotten, the sobriquet being taken as having some distant reference to the Corsican conqueror that about that time was lighting up Europe with a lurid glare.

A large quantity of human bones was found, many of them, especially the skulls, well preserved, and with them, as the excavation proceeded, were dug up curious objects of stone, hatchets, hammers, small vessels and miniature human figures and heads, with other trinkets whose use or purpose was not apparent. All the inhabitants of the sparsely settled neighborhood for miles about were speedily informed of the matter.

For days and weeks the visitors there were numerous and constant from all about the valley and the spot became more marked than ever, with a significance and meaning to it that promised to last forever. The isolated character of the locality prevented a knowledge of the strange discovery from speedily gaining any very wide circulation. But it penetrated, after many months, into the outer world, and years afterward, when every trace of the discoveries had been obliterated, strangers came to the spot, even from far-distant localities and countries, to look upon the remains and to build up theories from them as to former races of men occupying the land. It didn't make much difference that the remains were not to be seen, the theories came all the same and found their places



in the encyclopedias and magazines, indistinct and uncertain as to locality and sense as were many, if not most, of the inquiries and investigations of the day.

The bones were carefully, if not tenderly, gathered together and buried in the earth at one corner of the plateau, and the trinkets and implements were spirited away about as fast as they were dug up. No one seemed to object to this method of disposing of them—indeed, to those the most interested, careless or ignorant of their value, it was the easiest way to be rid of them. In many of the ancient farmhouses in the valley there are to be seen to this day specimens of these curious things. Whence they came, ceasing to be a matter of interest, is quite forgotten now.

That next morning the digging and plowing went on, perhaps more briskly than before, with an unacknowledged desire on the part of the workmen to get through with a job amid such surroundings in as quick a time as possible.

With almost the first of the workmen to appear came Dandy, freshly decked with a profusion of dandelions, plucked with the dew still on them. He stood at the edge of the excavation looking down into it, with a wandering, indeterminate gaze, never fixed long on one spot or one object. The men did not interest him, nor the horses, nor what they were doing. After a time he followed



one of the teams into the cellar and ran from corner to corner, stopping at each for an instant and then springing back, with a cry that was sometimes enlivening, sometimes bitter, oftener pitiful and mournful, and ending with a sound more like a moan than a laugh. He came at length up out of the cellar and ran from it at a furious rate for a few rods, looking around behind him over his shoulder now and then. He came to a sudden stop and faced around, then once more, slowly and with seeming caution, retracing his steps toward the cellar, standing again at its edge. His wandering, uncertain gaze took in the hollow place, resting for only an instant on one spot. Presently he threw up his hands, uttering a cry that was hardly human in its tone, such a one that if heard from a distance or in a forest in the dead of night would have started the cold shivers in the blood; and, turning again, he fled from the place with almost the speed of a swift-running hound, disappearing down the incline of the plateau toward the river.

“I wonder what’s the matter with the idiot to-day!” exclaimed one of the workmen to some of the others, all of whom had been watching the strange antics of the lad.

And so the work went on and progressed. The foundations were laid and upon them the timbers, and upon them the layers of stone and mortar.



Cameron Catlin took infinite pains with his work, as he had an extreme interest in it.

“It is a big job for me and for the P’int,” he said. “We’ll have a house—a mansion there—worthy of the colonel. It’ll be many a year before another one its equal will be put up anywheres around here.”

Whether he was a builder by nature whose inmost spirit was developed by the business he had undertaken, or an enthusiast in whatsoever he had in hand, the place and the work seemed to fascinate and possess him. For the moment his life was its life, and his wife sometimes wondered what he would do when the enterprise was completed and off his hands and mind. He talked of it constantly, frequently taking her and the children up to look at it, showing them how it would look from this point or that, and how supreme was the view from this window or that porch. He was ever planning some new effect, some new decoration or ornament for door-casing, cornice or molding, exterior or interior. In the cant of the present, perhaps it might be said of him that he was in advance of his day, for in the general plan and detail of the work he introduced many of the artistic ideas that prevail and are considered novel at the present time.

From being a regular attendant upon the services of the church he came to neglect such duties,



going every Sunday up to "the house," and sometimes remaining there all day. His inspection and examination on these days almost always brought him home in the evening nervous and petulant at finding something neglected or something done that might have been done in some other way much better and more in harmony with its surroundings.

His wife, bred to a strict observance of all churchly duties, rebelled at these actions of her husband, for herself, himself and the sake of the children. On their account were the first harsh words uttered that ever passed between them. He corrected himself for a time in this respect, but speedily "the house" resumed its control over him and he neglected the church services entirely. His wife and the children were the companions of the Rev. and sometimes Mrs. Howard Cantine in their walks to and from the services; but Mrs. Cantine being an invalid, the somewhat lengthy journeys were oftener made with Mr. Cantine alone.

Builders and architects are born, not made, as much as are poets. In humble corners of the world as well as in the busy marts thereof you sometimes come across structures that are poems, in stone, iron or wood, mayhap a simple song, a lyric or an epic; but in harmony, gracefulness and general effect, all the same, a poem. Of such as were the builders of these must have been Cameron Catlin, although his sphere was a contracted one.



In Colonel Atwater he had behind him, too, a patron who, whether or not he saw what was in him, humored him in what most men would have called whims or fancies.

From the start there seemed to be no limits to his willingness to second and pay for all the extravagances that Catlin's active mind and inventive originality could offer.

Every month or two he went to Buryilk and returned with the funds necessary to pay the workmen up to date. The amounts were not extravagant, for competent men were not plenty for the work after it had got above ground. For the same reason, and also because material was not readily obtainable, the building did not advance with great rapidity.

Besides, the climate of the valley is not as it was. It has undergone a wonderful and hardly-to-be-credited transformation within the century. Nearly all kinds of outdoor operations then were entirely suspended for almost, if not quite, five months of the year. From the first of November, and certainly from Thanksgiving Day, until the spring equinox in the latter part of March, deep and heavy snows covered the ground everywhere, in the forests and on the plains; the streams, large and small, were shut up solid, and the earth for many feet below the surface was hardened by the frost. Preparations were necessary for the winter,



as much as if a long journey was contemplated, and uncompleted work had to be protected from the severe weather to save it.

“That’s as it should be,” asserted Catlin. “Slow and sure will make it all the more solid, permanent and enduring.”

And many months passed, until those who observed could begin to see the idea of the building, as it might be called. The stone was laid up to the top of the second story, and, although all about the premises were the evidences of the incompleteness of the work—the scaffoldings, the heaps of stone and mortar, a tool here and there or a barrow and hods—yet from only a little distance could be gathered a notion of the ultimate design of the whole, an assurance that the structure was to be unusual in such a locality and a marked one even in a long-settled country.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### VIOLET.

THE enterprise continued to be a source of comment and conjecture in the long winter evenings in the barroom of the tavern or on the porch thereof in the summer time. Each wise commentator



whose observation or experience was the most limited had the most startling notions to advance or the most curious theories to expound, and when, as often happened, the colonel was not present, even he himself was criticised and canvassed with great freedom, if not fairly torn to pieces. The presence of a goodly quantity of "hard money," gold and silver, in the valley, entirely due to Colonel Atwater, which of course in its natural order circulated freely about among the settlers and made "times easier for them" than they had ever been before or were since for many a year, did not soften or modify the sentiments expressed, there perhaps being away down at the bottom of their hearts, its influence unacknowledged, however, a feeling of envy toward one who had infinitely more of this world's goods than any of them or all of them put together.

Such sometimes—perhaps not in these enlightened days—are the feelings excited in the human breast toward the fortunate or wealthy; and these were primitive times, when human nature had not so much reason or necessity for disguising or concealing its true characteristics.

"What gits me," said Captain Nathaniel Allchin, the recognized philosopher of the settlements, "what gits me is what he wants of sich a big house out here in the woods. I've thought about it consid'bul, but can't come to no satisfact'ry conclu-



sion. If he's got a large fam'ly—well, but here's no place for a large fam'ly, if so be they're children. Better take 'em where ther' ain't so much backwoods. P'raps he wants to hide 'em and himself away. P'raps he's done somethin' 'f which he and them are ashamed. No tellin'. No one 'round here knows nothin' 'bout him, 'cept maybe Kar-kle, and *he* wouldn't tell if he knowed. *We* dunno where he got his money that he seems t' fling 'round so freely."

"What difference does it make to us how or where he got it," asked Caleb Ordway, the landlord, "so long as we get a good share of it?"

"Big diff'rence!" Captain Allchin retorted. "Big diff'rence. I'd be 'fraid t' handle money thet was robbed from some one or thet hed blood on it. So'd you, Caleb."

"I can't see what all that nonsense has to do with Colonel Atwater," replied Caleb.

"Well, we dunno, we dunno," pursued the captain. "Soon come, soon gone, and easy got, quick spent, covers many a case that I've heard my father tell on. Anyhow, what's he or any one want of sich a house here? To be proud on and lord it over us poorer folks? I've heard my uncle say that 'Big houses don't make happy homes.'"

"Little ones don't either," put in Stephen Roberts, the blacksmith, who was a living example of the truth of his expression.



“Size has nothin’ to do with happiness anyhow,” urged Caleb Ordway.

“Why don’t you ask Colonel Atwater to make his house smaller, Captain Allchin?” suggested “Bill” Timms, the scapegrace of the settlement. “He’d do it probably if you asked him, or he’d tell you why he wanted it as it is, if you asked him that.” There was a slight laugh at this sally, but to it the captain deigned to make no reply or even to give sign that he heard it.

“It’ll come out some day,” he said; “there’s reason for everything, my grandfather used to say. I may not live to see or hear this, but you all may.”

“Well, of all the foolishhest things,” exclaimed Caleb Ordway. “Here’s a rich man comes into our settlement, spends his money freely, makes the neighborhood lively and keeps things going, and you try to make out that he’s a robber or pirate or thief. What’s the matter, captain? Jealous, eh? Don’t you get enough of his money?”

“I wouldn’t tech a cent of it,” cried the captain, testily. “I want none of his money, nor nothin’ of him, neither. What you don’t earn you’re not apt to get or to keep, my father has telled me offen.”

Whether or not Colonel Atwater had overheard or had had repeated to him the substance of such discussions, for some weeks he had hardly been the genial, companionable man he was when he



first appeared at the Point. His greetings and polite carriage toward all of the inhabitants were unchanged, but they had become more stiff, formal and perfunctory. There had, apparently, also grown up some coldness or difficulty between him and Karkle. They were seldom together, and once there had been overheard in Karkle's office [some rather loud and sharp words pass between them.

And one day Mrs. Obed Bunn had been somewhat surprised to see coming up the path leading from the narrow road to her house the colonel's large and imposing form. Mrs. Bunn was engaged in the necessary household duties consequent upon the conclusion of the midday meal. She was more or less embarrassed by the presence of the colonel, a feeling that was not decreased by his asking her in the very deepest tones of his voice: "Are you alone, Mrs. Bunn?" It was with something of a stammer that she finally replied, that she *was* alone and that Obed had gone up to the Point after dinner for some needed household supplies. The colonel hadn't looked at her from the time of his appearance, and had not therefore noticed her embarrassment. His gaze had wandered all about the premises rather, and, as he stepped to the door, had taken in every nook and corner of the room. It could not be told whether he was looking to see whether or not she was really alone, or was seeking for something that he had expected to find there



and didn't see. So far as could be judged by his manner, he was a little nervous and anxious, if not considerably disturbed.

"I didn't know but what Mr. Bunn might be here," he said, presently, but it was clear he hardly knew what he was saying.

"No; you'll find him at the P'int," repeated Mrs. Bunn, having recovered her equanimity. "Do you want to see *him*, colonel?"

"No—yes," half stammered the colonel. "No matter, Mrs. Bunn, no matter—some other time will do." He moved back from the door, and, turning, started away from the house, going half way to the road or path leading to the Point. Then he faced around again and came back.

"By the way, Mrs. Bunn," he said, "now that I am here, where is that dark-skinned little girl, that I think used to live with you?"

And now, for some reason, Mrs. Bunn was disturbed. "I don't know," she said.

"Queer little thing," pursued the colonel. "Where has she gone?"

"I don't know," repeated Mrs. Bunn. "Of late she came and went as she liked. I could do nothing with her. She got beyond me."

"How long since you have seen her?" continued the colonel.

Mrs. Bunn looked at him sharply. "Weeks and weeks ago," she at length replied.



"Where?" persisted the colonel.

Mrs. Bunn hesitated a moment. "Well," she said, testily, "if you must know, it was in the cellar you were digging for 'the house.' The night was coming on fast: we, that is, Dandy and me, tried to get her to come out and come with us, but she wouldn't; so we came and left her there."

"And you haven't seen her since?"

Mrs. Bunn shook her head.

"Nor inquired about her?"

Mrs. Bunn again shook her head.

Colonel Atwater looked at her with some concern.

"What was she to you?" he asked, presently.

"Nothing at all. Worse than nothing at all. Useless," said Mrs. Bunn, somewhat impatiently. "She wasn't worth her clothes and keep. But she can look out for herself. No harm could ever overtake her. She was quicker'n lightning and as bright as the bottom of one of my new tin pans."

Withal, it was evident that the woman was trying to excuse herself rather to herself than to the colonel.

"Are you interested in her?" she asked, continuing. "Perhaps you'd like to know more of her."

The colonel was silent, but had a listening attitude and a listening look in his eyes. Perceiving these, Mrs. Bunn proceeded: "Her father was



half Indian by blood, whole Indian by nature. They lived when I came here seven years ago—Obed had come several years before that—on the other side of the river at the foot of the hills in a warm and sheltered spot. She was about six years old then. He fished and hunted and both of them half starved. They would have wholly starved or been frozen except for the settlers, who provided for them in return for such things as he could give them in the way of fish and furs, and because he was useful in keeping other Indians away, as he had great influence with them and they had great fear toward him. He wouldn't go away with them, for he had some crazy notion that the valley belonged to him. He acted sometimes as though it really did. A very little bit of liquor made him a great chief, and he went about in feathers and paint, ordering the settlers away from the locality by such a date, or they would all be massacred, as they had been at Minnisink and Cherry Valley. But he was only laughed at for his foolishness, and when the day he had set arrived he was as humble and pitiful and hungry as ever. They were our nearest neighbors, if you can call such neighbors, for some time. Our Dandy was there from the first. We took him from there. If he was gone and we wanted him, we'd always find him there. We soon found it was the safest place he could be in. No harm could come to him with Vile's sharp eyes on him all the



time, and her father learned him a good many things that no one else could have learned him—fishing and the like.

“Sometimes Dandy stayed there nights. After the first time or two we were not alarmed or in fear on account of his absence. One morning he came home at daybreak, uttering the most terrible cries. We tried to quiet him, but it was of no use. Obed got an idea in his head that they had abused or injured the boy in some way, and, taking his gun, he crossed the river and went to their cabin. It was very quiet there; the door was half opened. He pushed it all open and looked in. Vile sat in one corner of the hut holding her father’s head in her lap. Her eyes shown like those of a wildcat disturbed among her young. She wouldn’t let Obed approach, waving him away with her hand in a fierce manner. He didn’t want to approach, for he saw what the matter was. He came after me and we took Dandy with us back to the hut. Without him we would hardly have been able in some length of time to get Vile away from the dead body of her father. We got some of the neighbors together and we buried him right there where he died, in the ground underneath where his hut stood. Vile said he wanted it so, and he owned that spot, anyhow. There was nowhere else for Vile to go, so she came here. It was a sorry day for me, for there did not seem ever to be any work



in her. She couldn't do a thing about the house, and if in a fit of gratitude for what we had done for her—which she had a few times—she undertook to do anything, she spoiled it. I'm glad to be well rid of her, if I am rid of her; but I do not doubt but what she'll come back presently—tired, hungry and ragged.

“Now, colonel,” Mrs. Bunn concluded, “you know as much about her as any one does, except that she was proud, careless, obstinate, lazy, aggravating always, and sometimes impudent and impertinent.”

Colonel Atwater had listened with unmistakable but not absorbing interest to the recital, and at its conclusion, without a word, turned away from the door. Stopping and looking back, however, he said :

“It isn't necessary, Mrs. Bunn, to refer to this at any time or to mention to any one that I asked about her. It's only a mere matter of curiosity on my part.” Then he passed on to the path murmuring to himself in his deep voice : “Queer little thing. Queer little thing.”

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## CHAPTER IX.

## WHY THE WORK STOPPED.

JUST before the winter set in all work at "the house" stopped and the premises were boarded up and covered completely. When the snow fell they looked like a great white mound or, as Captain Allchin once observed, "like a sepulcher." The winter was occupied by the men in the shop getting out the interior woodwork ready to be put up. The first fall, Colonel Atwater had gone away to supply himself with funds, and returning, settlement with Catlin and the men at work had been made up to the date of its stoppage. Colonel Atwater had gone away then and remained the whole winter—indeed, until the time came in the spring to resume operations.

In this fall, weeks before the usual closing of the season, Colonel Atwater again went away from the Point, supposably with the intention of doing as he had done the year before.

He never came back !

The usual heavy rains that came to "fill up the swamps," which had to be done every season before winter could by any possibility arrive fully equipped to stay, had come much earlier that fall than ever



before, and the streams speedily felt their effects. The little brooks along the hillsides came tumbling down into the valley in greatly increased volume; the larger creeks took up the water, swelling to more than bank full and roaring on their way toward the great river which swung along in an ocean-like current, seeming almost alive with its accelerated motion, and uttering a sound that seemed to be a song of "rejoicing in its might."

Colonel Atwater stepped in his boat from the bank just below Colonel Beckwith's storehouse. Karkle and Catlin were there to see him off.

"I'll be there to-morrow night, with this current," said Colonel Atwater.

"And you'll only have to keep at its edge, at that," added Karkle.

The boat was a stout skiff, built with a flat bottom and a curved bow. It was wide and roomy, and the presence of even as large a man as Colonel Atwater in it made no impression upon its buoyancy, except, perhaps, to make it rock and tumble the more in the waves that were washed up to the bank.

The seat at the stern was cushioned and so large as to be almost a lounge, and there were places on the gunwales alongside it for standards, to which could be hoisted an awning if one was required. The whole interior of the boat, with pieces of rag carpet in the bottom and padded sides, was evi-



dently arranged for the comfort of those who might occupy it.

“Hadn’t you better let Hector go along with you?” Catlin asked. “The current is pretty stiff, and you might get into trouble.”

“Ho!” cried the colonel. “I’m no land lubber. I haven’t been up and down the river so many times within the past two or three years that I should need help to navigate a little thing like this. Besides, you’ll need every man you’ve got to finish up what is necessary to do before the winter sets in.” He arranged the articles in the boat as he spoke—a small box containing letters that he carried to forward from Buryilk, a trunk in which were his clothes, a large wolf robe, an umbrella and an overcoat. He seated himself at the stern, took the tiller in his right hand and called to Catlin to push him out. Both Catlin and Karkle seized the stern of the boat and gave it a vigorous shove. The bow caught the outer edge of the current, slowly swung round into it, and, answering the motion of the tiller, moved off toward the east.

A number of laborers loading an ark for “Grin’-stone” Beckwith just below stopped work, a group of persons on the top of the bank and Catlin and Karkle watched the little bark as, with speedily accelerated motion, it felt the swift current, and continued to watch it until it disappeared around the bend made at the foot of the eastern hills.



Colonel Atwater had called out, as he swung into the current :

“I’ll be back the latter part of the month !”

The colonel, sitting quietly in the stern, was very complacent. He thought there was nothing more exhilarating than swift motion without effort, and gradually, with a confidence born of desire, pulled more and more toward the center of the current. Something seemed to say to him : “Swifter, swifter !”

He was watchful of his course, although there was nothing to make him apprehensive. It was not the first time that he had made such a journey, although never when the river was so exuberant. There was an excitement about it that stirred him as a man is seldom stirred. The absolute solitude in which he found himself increased his feelings. He felt like calling out in answer to the mighty rush and swing of the mass of moving water by which he was surrounded. The thick forests on each bank ; the graceful hills in the distance, all looking so lonesome and untenanted, and the deep waters all about him, made him feel so small in comparison, and yet so strong in himself. They seemed not to notice nor care for him, a mere mite, a speck in the midst of so much magnificent natural grandeur. And yet, he felt that he could subdue them all and wanted to cry out : “Here am I. Look at me. I can conquer you all !”



It was hardly an hour from the Point and he was in the very middle of the current, sweeping along with exciting rapidity. He had noticed from a distance, as he approached, a peculiar object just in his course. As he came nearer, its lines became clearer and he saw it was a great tree that in some way had become anchored, its roots mayhap caught in the crevice of some great rock at the bottom of the river, and it was breasting the waves like a live thing, the spray dashing up against it, tossed high in the air. It was a picture in itself that, transferred to the canvas, would have made the fame and fortune of an artist.

The colonel thought he would pull as closely as possible, to get a good look at the attractive object. A man could have such a chance but once in his life. He let his boat fly directly forward, intending to pull to one side at the proper moment. He thought he could measure with his eye the distance, and judge of his velocity.

On he came. He was fairly fascinated by the spectacle, but he kept his head, with his hand firmly grasping the tiller of his boat.

The moment to turn came. He gave his tiller a sudden and tremendous wrench to the right, and sat paralyzed at the result. He held only a broken piece of wood in his hand! The implement had parted with the post that connected it with the rudder!



In an instant more the boat dashed into the tree, the rough branches tearing his face and eyes and clothes, and the spray blinding and bewildering him. As sometimes, too, the mere touch of a child will dislodge and send a huge rock tumbling down the hillside, so the shock and stroke of the boat, small as they were in comparison with the mass before them, loosened the anchorage of the immense tree. It gave one great shudder, moved a little forward, and then, with a sudden lurch, with the force of the volume of water driving it from beneath, turned completely over, carrying underneath it the boat and all that it contained.

And the great river went roaring on toward the ocean, terrible in its uncontrollable force and strength, and magnificent in its godlike grace and beauty.

In all the suddenness of the disaster there had been but one cry of horror and anguish. It flew across the tumbling waters, even above their roar, and found its way into the forest nearest at hand.

There was a small hut in a secluded spot at the foot of the hills. It had never been much of a tenement at its best, but it was a mere decayed and decaying shell now. A lad was there carrying in his arms great bunches of dandelions. Cautiously he approached the hut and peeped in at the doorway. The quiet and silence were so oppressive that well-atuned ears would have rung with it. In



one corner was a slightly raised mound of earth. The lad, tiptoeing and looking around as he entered, went to the mound and laid his bunch of dandelions upon it. Then, still looking around, he retraced his steps. Standing in the doorway, he heard the cry. He looked wildly this way and that for an instant, and then started on a run toward the bank of the river. It was only a few rods away. His eyes took in and his meager intelligence partially grasped the meaning thereof, the sight of a tree in mid-river, trembling and shaking for a moment in the current and then going over with its force, a boat in its branches and a large, dark object, overcome and helpless, going down into the waves.

“I wonder what ails Dandy again to-night,” said Mrs. Bunn to Obed. “He came home this morning making noises as fearful as he did when Vile’s father died. He was gone half a dozen times during the day, coming back every time with the same if not worse cries. Just you look at him jumping around in his sleep all the time and constantly groaning !”

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## CHAPTER X.

## KARKLE FIXES IT.

NEVERTHELESS, the work was continued, the workmen and he at their head ignorant that the moving hand and head of it all would never again return. The time in his absence passed from its measurement by days into a computation of it by weeks. A pay day came when there was nothing to satisfy the demands of the workmen. Little was thought of this, for the entire responsibility of their employer had never been questioned, although, in fact, it had never been tried, and the account at the store could easily run another week or another fortnight. A second pay day passed, and for the moment there was some anxiety expressed by a number of the men, which was allayed by Catlin with the expression, more a suggestion or a hope, that another week would put an end to their suspense and expectation. A third Saturday came when, what had been mere murmurs, became loud expostulations and demands. The scores at the store had grown to unpleasant and alarming dimensions ; the horses needed feed and the children shoes. It was with increased difficulty that Catlin quieted and subdued these complaints with references to next Saturday—sure, which he had not a



shadow to support, except the past promptness and generosity of Colonel Atwater.

And the fourth pay day came. Around Catlin's shop came a tumultuous and now grown-angry mob. The weather had begun to grow chilly, with heavy frosts at night, indicating the approach of the winter season and the consequent shutting down of all the work. Many of the men depended upon these latter weeks of the working season and some little sums that they had allowed to accumulate during the summer to help carry them through the winter. If they should lose all, it meant hardship, even distress, to them and their families.

Catlin pleaded with them to go on for another week. He was himself in the same strait with them all. Colonel Atwater's absence could not assuredly run beyond the time when the work usually ceased. And on his return they would shut down for the season and then all would be paid in full, to the last penny.

All this time the strain on Catlin had been heavier and more than the mere settlement with the men.

There had that happened to him which he could not understand, and the influence of which, struggle with it as he might, he could not shake off. "The house" seemed to have tightened its grip upon him so far as to engross his waking and sleeping thoughts, to the exclusion of everything



else. It grew to be a part of himself, and as it advanced it seemed to him that he gave so much the more of himself to it, so much the more of his life, of his very being. When, in the spring, he had had the coverings of board taken from it that the work might be resumed where it had been suspended, it seemed as though the structure looked at him with an evil eye, and shook itself warningly at him like an aroused giant, a notion not the less real because a light fall of "sugar snow" of the night before came tumbling from the boards, looking not unlike gray hairs shaken at him. Earliest in the morning, even before any of the workmen, he was on the ground; latest in the evening, when all the others had gone, he was there. Weary spirits are said sometimes to haunt places to which they have been attached. In the case of Catlin it would be difficult to determine which did it; whether he haunted the place or the place haunted him.

One night long after midnight he woke his wife with a start, and seeing him up and dressing himself, she asked him what under the moon he was doing and where he was going.

"Alice," he answered, quietly, but firmly, "I dreamed that the walls had fallen! It is as vivid to me as though I stood looking at the heap of ruins they made. I am going up to see."

"What foolishness!" cried his wife. "If they



have fallen, they'll be there in the morning, and you'll have to put them up again, after all."

He said no more, but, quietly finishing dressing, he went as quietly out of the house and toward the grounds. His wife thought afterward that he seemed in his movement and speech like one still in his dream or one walking in his sleep.

A very slender strip of a new moon hung low in the western sky and lit up the whole surroundings of "the house" with a dim, subdued, melancholy light, scarcely able to make distinct where the line of the shadows began or left off. Everything was as it had been left when work for the day had ceased, the walls looking as solid and permanent as the everlasting hills that shut in the valley.

Catlin walked around the building, stopping at each side to look up at the walls. The east side was in the darkness of the darkest shadow of the night. He stood there, looking at the wall as it loomed up, faintly outlined by the moonlight. Suddenly and with no premonition of its coming, there was a rattle of mortar, earth, stone and nails, and something fell within with a clatter and ringing intonation apparently from the highest point completed, even to the cellar. There was a dripping for a minute or two as of the dust or smaller particles following a larger body and then complete silence more absorbing than that which had preceded the noise.



With a vivid dream still fresh in his heart, Catlin stepped back and threw up his hands, expecting every moment to see what had come to him in his sleep verified. But that was all.

He listened a moment longer and then went toward the front of the house, climbing up the plank that led to the main door. It is not too much to say that he knew every stick of timber, almost every stone in the whole building. Unfinished as it was, he could, in the darkness as in the light, go over every portion of it without danger of accident. Leaning one of his hands against the doorpost, he looked within in the gloom. There was a stray ray of moonlight here and there on the lower floor, shining through the windows, and broad patches of it on the upper floor where it fell through the unfinished walls. As he looked, straining his eyes to see what had fallen, he was sure that a shadow crossed one of these broad patches. His eyes gave him assurance of the fact, but his ears did not confirm it, for there was no sound following the movement. A courage that had for its foundation a determination to protect "the house" from any ill-fortune or depredation, led him to the foot of the temporary flight of stairs or mere ladder-like convenience leading from the lower to the upper story.

He ascended lightly and quickly and had only time to look around and see that all through the



upper floor, which was entirely exposed to his view, there was no sign of any creature that could make a moving shadow. And then the slender strip of moon went down behind the western hills.

Catlin began to descend the ladder, going down much slower than he had gone up. He stopped when only half way in his descent, for now it was the turn of his ears to appeal to him. His eyes had done their duty, but they had become helpless. He could see nothing in the deep and deepening gloom, except through the doorway, where the darkness was only a little less pronounced than within. But he could hear; and which sense, by itself alone, unaided by any other, is able to contribute the most in the way of terror?

Penetrating the air as does the mist, as he stood midway on the ladder, came to him a hoarse whisper, like the wind rushing through a crevice. It breathed but one word: "Hush-sh-sh," with a long-drawn-out and hissing intonation. Catlin stopped, transfixed, with one foot just dropped from the rung of the ladder to descend.

It was no freak of his imagination, for there was not a breath of air stirring, and the word seemed all about him, rather than emanating from one spot. He listened intently, his heart beating with throbs like strokes of a hammer. It came again with a long-drawn breath or deep sigh, sounding almost at his elbow: "Stop! Stop it! It may be



too late," repeating the last two words with a lengthened cadence to the "too," like the hoot of an owl, the whole dying away in a wail that seemed vanishing in the far-off woods.

Catlin's blood fairly froze in his veins, his cheeks blanched and his muscles weakened. With a groan, he lost his hand and foothold and slid down from the ladder to the floor in an unconscious heap.

In an hour's time, and he not returning, his wife aroused two of his workmen and sent them out to see what the matter was. They found him sitting at the foot of the ladder in a more or less dazed condition. To their inquiries and the inquiries of all for many a day as to what was the matter, his only reply was: "Nothing. Nothing. The merest accident in the world."

When Captain Nathaniel Allchin heard of the incident, and it was not long in being made known to every one in the settlements, he had no words to utter, which was an unusual thing for him, but his action was rather significant if far from the truth. He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb at Caleb Ordway's barroom and shrugged his shoulders.

Perhaps he had some reason for his suggestive gestures, for, almost unconsciously to himself, Catlin's visits to the spot indicated by Captain Allchin, having a beginning in his genial and con-



vivial disposition, had of the late months greatly increased in number and frequency. What he got there was like a universal wrench working equally well in all directions. It revived his drooping spirits and increased the activity of his brain; or calmed him when he was excited, and quieted his nerves when he was perturbed; it warmed him when he was cold, cooled him when he was hot, moistened him when he was dry and dried him when he was wet. It was a wonderful friend on short acquaintance, or one seldom met with. It was full of treachery and lying deceit after it had been made an intimate of. The flushed cheeks, supernaturally sparkling eyes, thickened utterance and sometimes unsteady legs of Catlin were accompaniments that he carried home with him from Caleb Ordway's barroom.

The first time, hardly perceptible to any but those who knew him intimately, was a shock to Alice Catlin that might almost have been, and in some respects better so, a physical blow. The second time it was hardly less bearable, but the twentieth or fortieth time it had become a mere matter of course, a cross to be borne.

But it was not lifted to the shoulders patiently or without an effort to cast it away. Gently and tearfully at first were the efforts made, with some slight effect for a brief time, until such persuasion was seen to have failed. Petulantly and complain-



ingly then, with an effect looking in the wrong direction, and finally angrily and threateningly.

The Rev. Howard Cantine tried to exercise his priestly influence to persuade Catlin to alter his course, mildly and gently expostulating and reasoning with him.

“Did Alice ask you to speak to me?” Catlin inquired, after listening silently to what the clergyman had to present.

“She did,” was the reply.

“Tell her you have done as she wished,” said Catlin, and turned away.

And so on the fourth pay day, Catlin had other, heavier matters weighing upon his heart than the mere money owing to the workmen, although that pressed the harder for the moment. He couldn’t still their impatience any more than he could dispute their demands. What should he do? what should he do?

One thought at length entered his mind. It was a last and not much relished resource, but he would try it. Bidding the men wait for only a few moments, he hastily left the shop. His movement was so sudden and quick that his intention was not known until he had gone from them. The thought instantly in the mind of all of them was fully expressed by one who had always been their leader.

“Look out, boys,” he cried. “One has skipped away, leaving us in the lurch; let us take care



that two don't play the same trick. One of you follow him and keep your eyes on him. Don't let him get out of your sight for a minute."

A mason, with a keen eye, made the first move, and following quickly from the shop, caught sight of Catlin going rapidly up the street. He quickened his pace and almost came up with him. It was not far that he had to follow, for Catlin stopped in front of Karkle's house, the steps to the front door of which began right on the narrow footpath that answered for a sidewalk. He knocked and the door was presently opened by Karkle himself, in his shirt-sleeves and his hair very much rumpled up.

"I don't know what to do," said Catlin, before he had hardly crossed the threshold. The workman watching stepped closer to the house. He could stand in the footpath and see in at the window, and there he stood until Catlin again emerged.

"What is it?" asked Karkle, as he closed the door.

Catlin explained the situation arising from the continued absence of Colonel Atwater, although Karkle knew it all, as did every one of the inhabitants of the settlements, concluding with the expression he had used at first: "I don't know what to do."

Karkle brushed imaginary specks from his clothes, pulled up his shirt-sleeves and then pulled



them down, reached over and scratched his ankle, clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back and stretched his arms at full length and half yawned—was never at rest for a moment, his incessant movement not having the tendency to quiet Catlin's anxiety or allay his nervousness.

"I judge," said Karkle, "that all that is wanted is money to pay the men."

"That's it," replied Catlin.

"And you haven't got any," continued Karkle.

"That's it again," replied Catlin.

"Any way to raise any?" pursued Karkle.

Catlin shook his head.

"Atwater's sure to be back again before the winter. He'd pay well, no doubt, for all that was used in his absence," Karkle said, rather musingly to himself. "He's too much tied to the place to give it up at this stage." Then moving his hand up and down, as though beating time, he thought a moment. "Do you want me to help you?" he asked, presently.

"If you can," said Catlin.

Karkle thought a moment more.

"Let it go another week," he said at length. "If Atwater don't turn up by that time, I'll see that you are helped out. Do you own the house where you live?" he asked, suddenly changing the subject.

Catlin nodded his head.



“Clear?”

“Clear,” repeated Catlin.

“What is due the men?” Karkle asked.

Catlin named a sum to the amount of several hundred dollars.

“So much?” asked Karkle.

Catlin answered by saying it might be a little more or less, but that the total was increased by some accumulations during the summer.

Karkle looked up toward the ceiling as though going through a calculation or weighing some possibility.

“If Atwater isn’t here next week and you will give me a short note for the amount, I will see that you have the money,” he at length said, coming down from the ceiling, adding: “And when Atwater does come, we’ll make him pay for it.”

The entire confidence that had grown up in Catlin’s mind in his two or three years of almost close intimacy with Colonel Atwater would not permit him to hesitate for a moment over such an offer, or to stop for any mature consideration of a plan presented to him that would lift him out of his troubles. He accepted at once.

But when he was returning to his shop the thought came, Why should he assume responsibilities that were in reality no concern of his? What if the colonel should never return? The men would certainly suffer, but so of course would he.



But the colonel would return. The colonel *must* return.

And back of it all was "the house" itself, drawing him toward it with a power that he could not resist, holding tightly every string to his heart. It was his life—more than his life. He must not slight that or turn his back on it. It must have complete birth, an entirety, a fullness of existence as his brain had conceived it. A maimed, disfigured, uncompleted thing, it would drag him down in disappointment and misery, and mayhap even to his death!

The men, however, suspicious of Catlin, would hear to no extension of time on his mere word. Karkle himself was obliged to come forward and say to them as he had said to Catlin, that even if Colonel Atwater did not return during the coming week, he would indorse Catlin in his assurance that on the following Saturday they should all be paid in full.

The men were employed in the time named, in closing up the work for the winter season, near at hand, covering the half-finished walls with boards, making a temporary roof and almost building a wooden shell around the whole structure.

Colonel Atwater did not come, but the men all received their pay in full and Karkle locked up in his safe a bit of paper bearing Cameron Catlin's signature.



## CHAPTER XI.

## CATLIN'S "SHORT NOTE."

THE snow flew thick, fast and furious, and the cold blasts from the northwest swept down from the hills and over the Great Plains, shutting in the valley in its utter seclusion as much as though it had been locked in a gigantic box and swung by itself in the heavens with nothing to hold it but gravitation. The possibility of the return of Colonel Atwater was entirely disposed of for the present. Neither he nor any one else could have penetrated from the outer world to this retired spot except through severe hardship and many dangers.

Catlin's "short note" seemed to him to have very long legs and to have pulled on the mystical "seven league boots," for it matured with the rapidity of a melon under the hot rays of an August sun. He knew, as well as Karkle, that it had been issued on an expectation that was something much more to them than a mere probability—in fact, what they esteemed a certainty.

At first, it seemed to be a mere pleasantry between the two men. It was many days after the paper became due that Karkle, meeting Catlin, rather good-naturedly than otherwise asked: "When you going to pay that note?"



Catlin's sensitiveness to his liability and responsibility was touched by the good-humored tone, and he replied: "You know. When Colonel Atwater returns." It seemed a sufficient answer, and no more was said until many days more, when, meeting again, Karkle said, not quite so good-naturedly this time: "Let us fix up that note in some way, Catlin."

"Why?" asked Catlin.

"Why, as a mere formal matter," replied Karkle. "The Asbestos requires some security for its investments. If 'twas mine, or I had it, it wouldn't matter. But it's some one else's."

But nothing was done, and the matter remained as it was.

The winter passed and the brown earth once more lifted itself from its white and frozen blankets, moist and steaming, ready for its change of apparel to the spring and summer restful and varying green shades. The day came to remove from the work the protecting shields, but there was no preparation looking to that end.

Catlin walked sadly up to the spot, and the whole surroundings wore to him a ruined, distressed look, typical of his condition and feelings. It seemed to him that his life also was ruined and blasted, reaching an end before it was hardly begun, like a broken column in a graveyard, topped with only a ragged fracture.

The situation was thoroughly discussed by the barroom philosophers at Caleb Ordway's. Like a motion to adjourn in good parliamentary usage, the subject was always in order there. Captain Nathaniel Allchin appeared to enjoy what he in-



sisted upon was the termination of the whole enterprise. He did not plume himself on his prophetic foresight, or claim to be one of those "I-told-you-so fellows"; but said it was no more than he had expected.

"A great, big, puffed-up individual coming into this quiet spot with a splurge like an empty barrel dropping into a mud-puddle!" he exclaimed. "We have to work hard here for a living, seeing our accumulations increase as if by crumbs and specks. Only in that way will the valley increase, multiply and grow prosperous. We are none of us lords and barons with a store from which we can draw whether we put in anything or not to replenish it. But you'll find it always so, the noisiest hen lays the littlest egg, as I have heard my grandfather say!"

The spring passed, the summer came and nothing was heard from or of Colonel Atwater. Karkle made one journey to Buryilk, but no one there knew anything of the missing man. On his return he met Catlin on the street and asked him to his office.

When there, he opened the business at once.

"We've got to do something about that note," he said. "The Asbestos is beginning to growl and insists upon having it secured. They look to me—I have nothing—I look to you."

"And I look to Colonel Atwater," said Catlin.

"Very well," said Karkle. "Then it is all a mere matter of form to satisfy the Asbestos. No doubt Colonel Atwater will return some time or other. A man isn't wiped out like this without leaving some indications somewhere of having once



been alive. You can secure the Asbestos and still look to Colonel Atwater to protect you."

"How?" asked Catlin.

"Give the Asbestos a mortgage on your house and lot."

Catlin started slightly at this, it coming over him with renewed strength how deeply he was involved.

"You run no risk," continued Karkle; "for it must be that Colonel Atwater will return some day or other."

Catlin was very thoughtful.

"I don't wish to make you unnecessary trouble or expense," Karkle went on. "But the Asbestos is imperative in its requirements to be secured in its outlay. They say the matter has been delayed much too long already."

Catlin was still thoughtful.

"I don't want to put the note in judgment," pursued Karkle, "with its long train of costs and expenses—you haven't the shadow of a defense—when the matter can be arranged with entire satisfaction to the Asbestos so quickly and inexpensively. I will draw all of the papers and attend to everything, and it shan't cost you one penny."

The only reply that Catlin made as he left the office was "I'll see," to which Karkle returned: "Be as quick about it, then, as you can, for the Asbestos is pressing me."

The clouds and shadows that had arisen between Alice Catlin and her husband, from various causes, made it harder for him to explain to her his needs and what was required of him. She was shy of the matter from the start, and, understanding



that the contemplated project could not be accomplished without her willing signature, utterly refused to give it. When further informed that the situation had arisen from complications connected with "the house," her refusal was still more emphatic and decided.

"That miserable job has already got between us, Cameron, to our unhappiness and undoing. You are a completely changed man since you knew Colonel Atwater and his projects. Something tells me that he will never come back."

"Bosh!" cried Catlin, impatiently. "That's the woman of it. He must come back. He *must*."

For several days the controversy was kept up between them, each time with increased bitterness. "Tell her," said Karkle, "that a judgment will take away the house, whether she is willing or not."

It was the final effort made by Catlin in the direction desired. He was hardly himself when it began and was certainly not the Cameron Catlin of but a few years back. The dispute became a stormy quarrel and the subject matter of it was forgotten in mutual recriminations and complaints.

"A wife's a nuisance," cried Catlin. "I wish I had never married. You're the curse of my existence."

"Don't I wish it, too," returned Alice, "with such a thing for a husband, bringing disgrace on me and his own children!"

Bitterer things than this had been said, but a climax had been reached in the dispute that was maddening to Catlin, depriving him of every sense,



except a desire to hurt something. He raised his partially clenched hand and struck! It was a wild maniacal rush, but the blow, whether intended or not, fell across the brow of his wife! He saw her stagger slightly and catch at the table to steady herself, and what a look came into her eyes! His flushed face paled, and for an instant his heart stopped beating. He stood as one paralyzed, and in an instant more would have been on his knees at her feet. But as he raised his hand, the door was opened and the Rev. Howard Cantine stood in the room and saw the blow itself!

Catlin heard the muttered exclamation of the clergyman: "Wretch!" and his better impulses vanished in the presence of a third person.

"Go to your minister," he cried, "and let him comfort you!" and dashed out of the room.

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## CHAPTER XII.

### COLONEL ATWATER HEARD OF.

JEPHTHAH KARKLE was very much engaged in his office in drawing up some papers full of verbose repetitions and apparently useless and blind phrases, in which appeared expressions referring to Cameron Catlin and to "an organization duly incorporated and doing business in New York State under the name and style of the Asbestos Fire Insurance Company." A stout, sharp rap sounded on the outer door, and an impatient frown gathered on Karkle's brow as he testily cried: "Come



in." He didn't look up, continuing scratching with his quill pen on the blue paper before him, and as he turned a sheet, sprinkling it with black sand from a small tin box. Some minutes elapsed, and so intent was Karkle on his work that he had almost forgotten the presence of another person in the room. There was a slight preliminary cough, and then Karkle, without looking up, as though replying to the cough, said quickly: "You see I am very busy."

"Yes," said an unknown voice over his head. "I see, but I am a stranger hereabouts and I have come to you on business connected with Colonel Atwater."

At the mention of the name, Karkle threw down his pen and turned sharply around. He saw standing before him a well-dressed, fine-looking man, with every appearance of being in circumstances perfectly satisfactory to himself.

Karkle was so much interested that he even forgot to ask the visitor to be seated. It made no difference, however, for the stranger quietly took a chair and sat down. He gave one the impression of owning everything in sight.

"We find," he said, coming at once to business, "that Colonel Atwater was possessed of certain properties in this valley. There appear the names," he referred to a slip of paper in his hands, "of one Isaac Bunn and of another Jephthah Karkle, as connected with the several conveyances and grants. I have ascertained that Isaac Bunn is dead. You are Jephthah Karkle?" he said, rather questioningly, and concluded: "Where is this property?"

How the restless hands pushed the widespread



fingers through the bushy hair, picked at the papers on the table and at the specks in the clothing, and how the eyes sought the floor! The stranger might readily have supposed that his companion was disturbed, if not agitated, by his intrusion.

"I had nothing to do with it, except as attorney," said Karkle, presently, under his breath, and as though excusing himself before he had been accused. Then recovering himself he asked: "Where is Colonel Atwater?"

"That's what we'd like to know," said the stranger. Karkle looked relieved.

"Who are *we*?" he inquired, pertly.

"His numberless creditors," replied the stranger. Karkle was again disturbed.

"Creditors!" he repeated. "I thought he was a very rich man."

The stranger laughed sneeringly.

"He would have impressed any one in that way," he said. "But it was all hollow."

"How do you mean?"

"Trust and confidence," said the stranger, with some magnificence of manner. "Trust and confidence steady the world. A betrayal of them shakes it."

"Colonel Atwater betray any one's trust! Is that what you mean?"

"It looks that way. Colonel Atwater was intrusted with the care of a number of estates, some of them pretty large and some of them pretty small. Where are they? Where is Colonel Atwater?" He didn't wait for an answer, but continued: "If this property here is valueless, they'll be nowhere."



Karkle sat for a moment in deep meditation, his hands busy with the buttons of his coat. The words of the stranger had been suggestive to him.

"I would be at your service," he said, presently, "and I will help you all I can. But just at this moment I am very much engaged in some pleadings that should have been ready weeks ago. As usual with most of the men in our profession, for I take you to be a lawyer, I have put off the business until the last minute. Any one you meet can tell you where Colonel Atwater's property is, or in the morning, I will go to the spot with you and be of any assistance that I can."

"I suppose there is no need for haste," said the stranger, rising. "If I don't find it this afternoon, I will come to you in the morning." And he went from the office.

Karkle sprang up the moment he was alone and watched the stranger as he walked slowly toward Caleb Ordway's tavern. Once within it, Jephthah grasped his hat and went quickly out of the door. He walked rapidly up the street and was almost on a run when he arrived at Catlin's house. Catlin was at home, and in a few moments more both men were in Karkle's office.

The first words uttered by Karkle discomposed and upset Catlin. They were: "I've given up all hopes or expectations of Atwater's ever coming back!" As he spoke he saw the bewildered air and blank look on Catlin's face.

"You needn't look as though you had been struck dead," Karkle added. "For it makes a way out of it all for you, for me and for the Asbestos."



Catlin cheered up a bit, but was not entirely reassured.

"We can proceed, at any rate, as though we thought Atwater would never come back again," pursued Karkle. "Only what we do we must do quickly and immediately. We want to be first in, that's all."

Catlin didn't understand at all what was meant, and said nothing.

"You have a claim, an honest claim, on Colonel Atwater's property for labor, materials and money advanced. Seize the property and get the first grip on it. Let those who come after get what is left."

"What good would that do me?" asked Catlin.

"Make you!" exclaimed Karkle. "Don't you see? Who'd defend the action against your claim? No one. Buy in the property as it is at almost your own price. Who'd bid against you? No one. Don't you see?"

"Buy in the property?" sighed Catlin. "I haven't enough money to pay for one of the layers in the stone wall."

"I'll fix all that," said Karkle. "The Asbestos is not behind me for nothing! Mortgage it to the Asbestos!" He seemed very much excited over the thought in his mind, for his hands were flying around in an agitated and eager manner. "Mortgage it to the Asbestos, and look here! Get enough to finish 'the house' as you, and only you, can finish it."

Those last words touched a chord in Catlin's



heart that vibrated as though it had been swept by a hurricane.

“And then?” he fairly gasped.

“Realize on it all,” said Karkle. “This valley will not be very long in attracting the attention of the world, as I might say. Colonel Atwater made no mistake in selecting a site for his home that cannot be matched for beauty anywhere, I don’t care where the place is. Finish it as you had planned, and you’ll have sale for it, rest assured.”

“What am I to do?” fairly pleaded Catlin, helpless in the excitement of Karkle and his own desires.

“Leave it to me,” said Karkle. “Do as I say, and you’ll come out on the apex!”

“But that note?” said Catlin.

“Oh! yes,” Karkle replied, seizing some papers on the table as he spoke and tearing them into strips. “Don’t mind that now. We’ll include that in the claim. It will help make a foundation.”

There was a bright light in Karkle’s office until almost the next morning, and Catlin was there with him. About midnight they roused Justice of the Peace Krause from his early sleep, who came down grumbling and swearing. He had mumbled something while Catlin, with hat off and right hand raised, listened, and at the conclusion of the incantation he had said: “I do.” Then the justice signed and impressed a seal on some papers that already bore the signature of Catlin.

Early in the morning, hardly before the day had become firmly established, Karkle mounted his horse at the door of his office. He said to the



elderly woman who kept his house in order : " If a strange gentleman comes here to see me this morning, tell him it was imperative on me to file some papers at the county clerk's office that I had almost forgotten must be filed next day after tomorrow. Tell him also," turning back, for his horse had started, " that I'll not be home again for ten days, or more likely, two weeks." Then he trotted briskly off up toward the lake.

But the strange gentleman did not call again.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE WORK FINISHED.

THE wise commentators of Ordway's barroom, when again the April sun shone in the valley, were provided with additional subjects for their consideration, for, although Colonel Atwater did not appear, the coverings of the winter were removed from " the house " and the work was prosecuted with more vigor than ever ; more men were employed and they seemed to be pushed on by Catlin with a nervous energy that he had not heretofore shown. As would seem to be often the case, a man spends more freely and for more extravagant purposes money that he has borrowed, so Catlin hurried up the time when the money obtained from the Asbestos would be exhausted by adding to the decorative features of " the house," while not limiting or decreasing the useful ones.

For the scheme proposed by Karkle had been



entirely successful. The property which Colonel Atwater had begun to improve stood in the name of Cameron Catlin, subject to a pretty large lien of the Asbestos.

Catlin had determined that the premises should not again be shut up for the winter; that "the house" should at least be so far completed that the finishing of it could be done as well during the cold as the warm weather. It was for this reason that he considerably increased the force of workmen and did not decrease the expense thereby.

His determination was successful and his hopes had full fruition. It was hardly midsummer when he had the satisfaction of seeing the exterior of the work completed and he could contemplate it as so far done. Its completion was not all of the satisfaction returned to him. Its appearance was his delight, and he was not deceived in it. It was certainly as beautiful and graceful as an ancient Grecian temple. The fronts facing north and south were wide porticoes with six large heavy wooden fluted Corinthian columns, reaching from porch to cornice, and the eastern and western faces were broken with wings. There was a regular irregularity of the ground plan, that made possible a sky line in the roof that was harmonious even in its points, curves and straight lines. It was a large mansion, compared with those in its immediate neighborhood, but not large contrasted with many then in existence or now well known. But exposed as it was, by its position, from all points, it had this peculiarity: No matter from what direction viewed, it presented a beautiful contour, and, seen from anywhere near at hand or miles away in the valley,



it attracted the eye and captivated the senses from its graceful proportions and its harmony with its surroundings. On the other hand, it had no outlook from window, roof, door or porch that was not delightful. The pleasure it gave in being observed was returned to one by the pleasure in looking from it. It seemed fashioned, in itself and its surroundings, to be the abode of beauty, peace and all delights.

Poor little Aunty Skerrett, with ever the thought in her mind for the church, had been for many months revolving a notion, which was a pretty big one even for more important persons than herself. With the constant accretions to the population of the Point, and the winning eloquence and pastoral labors of the Rev. Howard Cantine, she had, with much more than complacency, observed the increase in attendance upon the services and a growing interest in the church. Why couldn't they have a church of their own and why could not "the house" be eventually made into one? It was a spot unequaled in the valley, and would make them as conspicuous all over the country in position and influence as was the situation of the building itself. In all of her movements in this, as well as other directions for the good of the church, she had been seconded and sometimes led by one who, although only a recent settler in the valley, had nevertheless acquired worthily the name of "good old Erasmus Force."

Mr. Force had come from the far South, having become acquainted with the valley in connection with several business transactions and trade with the locality which had been very profitable to him.



He had come up to view the land that produced so profusely, and, pleased with it, had established a store and storehouse on the bank of the river, that, as he observed, he might handle both ends of a profitable trade. He was an elderly gentleman, having with him in his business his son and grandson, both bearing the same name as his own, Erasmus. All were tall, strong men, and their mental characteristics were in harmony with their physical proportions.

Good old Erasmus Force had long been a widower; the grandson was unmarried, and the homes of all had been with the son, whose family, besides the son, consisted of his wife and two daughters, Amy and Sarah.

Aunty Skerrett had others to encourage her in the notion. She had had correspondence with a great corporation in the East that gave the lie to the old saying that "corporations have no souls," its actions in the use of its great income being in harmony with impulses of the most generous nature.

It was an easy matter, then, looking toward the ultimate end to be reached, to arrange that on the completion of "the house" it should be occupied by the Rev. Howard Cantine and his family. It might be only temporarily, at best; but even so, it suited him, and the financial efforts of the church demonstrated their ability, alone, to pay the moderate rent required and desired by Catlin. If the ultimate object failed, it would, at least, insure for the place an occupancy and care.

It was a happy day for Aunty Skerrett and a proud one for the Rev. Howard Cantine when he



moved his modest belongings from Catlin's house to his new home. It seemed to all the beginning of an end that would bring great usefulness and reward to the whole valley. To be sure, the scanty furnishings of the large, high-ceilinged rooms made the whole look bare, and some of the rooms were empty; but the clergyman's many books and the draperies with which he was well supplied, with pieces of furniture given here and there by his parishoners, gave promise of what the future would eventually bring to him and to the place.

Was it that nothing could be perfect, however? Must every beautiful woman or every charming landscape have some defect that, while not marring entirely the general effect, prevents perfection?

The lights were hardly all extinguished on the first night of the entire removal of the family into "the house," when the whole upper floor seemed to be disturbed by the movement of a multitude.

Doors banged and the stairs seemed to creak as though there was a procession going up and down, each individual in it opening and shutting the doors. Footsteps were heard plainly tramping, some with the heavy tread of booted heels and others like the soft pressure of slippers or moccasined feet.

The Rev. Howard Cantine rose hastily, lit a candle, and, with a courage that had for a foundation the teachings of his profession, made thorough search over the whole house, from the cellar to the attic. The latter was not yet floored, and he stood for a moment on the upper step of the stairway looking in turn in every direction as far as the light of the candle would carry his sight. He dis-



covered nothing unusual anywhere, and went back to his bed.

Each night for a month was he thus disturbed and thus made search, and each night with similar result.

He disliked to make any complaint for many reasons ; but one evening, rather late, the younger Erasmus Force being in "the house," he asked him to remain all night, and the invitation was accepted.

It was as quiet until morning all through the premises as in the depth of a desert !

The Rev. Howard Cantine had no explanation to offer to himself and would have scouted at a solution offered by Captain Allchin years afterward expressed in the words :

"Well ! What could you expect of a place built over an Indian graveyard ?"

Perhaps these visitations appealed somewhat to the conscience of the Rev. Howard Cantine.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

### WHAT CATLIN SAW IN THE SHADOW OF "THE HOUSE."

THERE was hardly a day, certainly not a week, that Cameron Catlin did not visit the place. There was yet, and constantly, much to do to finish it. He meant to have the walks and roads graded and the level lawn seeded. He meant to have trees planted here and there and the whole properly



fenced. Suggestions multiplied on him even after everything seemed to be done that could be done. He couldn't let the place alone and it wouldn't let him alone. He even went up in the evening and especially liked to look from all sides at the structure when the moon was shining full. Everything was softened and idealized then, and appealed the stronger to his sense of beauty and to his pride as the builder.

Thus standing, at one time, in the deep shadow of the moonlight, he saw the outer door of the study in the western wing softly open and a woman come therefrom. The bright light shone full upon her closely shawled and bonneted figure as she stood for a moment on the threshold. The Rev. Howard Cantine's tall, slender form was at her side. Catlin could hardly make out in the darkness what the action was, but the clergyman certainly stooped over, and for a second his head was close to that of the woman.

A cold, freezing sensation seized Catlin by the heart. He looked, and as he looked he pressed his hands to his head to be sure.

The door closed, and the closely shawled figure sped rapidly across the plateau, down its incline and so toward the Point. He followed, keeping her clearly in view. Along the road, which had been well graded and made into a very passable street within the years, now in the shadow of the trees, then in the open moonlight went the two, he constantly gaining. At his own gateway the figure stopped and passed up the path toward the house. He was so near to it that when she touched the latch of the door to enter he laid his hand upon



her shoulder. As he did so she turned her face toward him for the first time.

It was that of his wife !

His hands were very cold and his face in the moonlight looked like that of a dead man. He didn't recognize his own voice, it sounded so thick and husky as he asked :

“ Where have you been, Alice ? ”

Her eyes looked upon the ground, and she made no reply.

“ From where and from whom have you come to the care of my children ? ” he continued. “ I saw you part from him. ”

There was no reply.

“ Answer me, Alice, ” pursued Catlin. “ And tell me the truth ! ”

She had no answer in words, only in actions. She opened the door, went within and closed it in his face.

He stood a moment like one petrified, and turning, walked toward the road. He was on his feet all night, going hither and thither, down toward the river and the hills in either direction like a distracted man. As one is said to do when dying suddenly and in the final moment, he lived over and over again his life with Alice even to the minutest particulars. At one spot he always stopped with a shudder and a chill—at the moment when in his frenzy he had struck her and the minister had seen the blow. “ I didn't mean to do it ! I didn't mean to do it ! ” he groaned. He thought more of what he had been to her, or what he had not been to her, than of what she had done. He cursed himself and pitied her.



And early in the morning, worn, pale and haggard, he stood by the study door of "the house" and knocked. He was impatient at the knocking, rather wishing to burst in and take the man unawares. Mr. Cantine himself answered the summons. The bloodshot eyes and trembling lips of the visitor suggested the thought in his mind: "You've been drinking again," but he was soon undeceived.

Catlin pushed the man back into the room and followed, closing the door.

"You know why I am here at this time in the morning, and why I have paced the roads and the fields up and down the whole night," Catlin said, fiercely. "You are to answer to me. Get down on your knees!"

Cantine was no craven, was quick-witted and saw that his visitor was more than half crazed.

He calmly folded his arms, looked Catlin square in the eyes and replied: "Only to my God! What you have to say or to do I will receive standing."

Catlin reached out his hand to seize him, but physically more powerful than his opponent, he was mentally the weaker, and often in such encounters the strongest mind gets the better of it all. His hand dropped at his side.

"I will not kill you, although I might," he said. "And you deserve to die."

The thought came into Cantine's mind: "A man who will strike a woman no other man need ever stand in fear of." It was on his tongue to utter it, but he was wise enough to refrain from such an irritation.



“You must come down from your pulpit. You must quit the church. You must leave this valley,” said Catlin, through his teeth. “You must do it all within the week. And you mustn’t mention my name or Al—her name with it all. Do you hear?”

He spoke wildly as he concluded, and springing forward he caught the slender man by the shoulders in his powerful hands. He lifted him from his feet, notwithstanding the minister’s struggles, as a child would lift a doll, and flung him limp and loose into a far corner of the room. Without looking to see the effect of his exertion he turned and went out of the house. In the whole time he had not removed his hat from his head.

Consternation is the only proper word to employ in describing the effect produced on the people of the church on the next Sunday morning, only three days away, when the Rev. Howard Cantine, in a discourse said to have been one of the most eloquent, pathetic and touching that ever fell from his lips, announced his intention of leaving them immediately and of ultimately quitting the ministry entirely. He said he had long contemplated the move, and an accident of a recent date had confirmed him in his intentions. He didn’t say what the accident was, but some slight bruises on his face, a constrained and apparently painful use of one of his arms and a perceptible limp gave many the impression that it was one of a physical nature.

He secured a boat on the following day, and on the day after, with all of his belongings, floated down the stream toward Buryilk, and disappeared from the valley forever.



Aunt Skerrett, to the day of her death, never knew, happily, the cause of the departure of her favorite minister and mourned for the "blessed man," as she called him, from the time of his departure on, wondering why her church papers never contained his name or any allusion to him. And when, years afterward, one of her sons showed her a printed card that he had got somehow in some of his wanderings, a card admitting one person to view all the wonders, eccentricities and marvelous acts in "Jim Price's aggregation of talent gathered from the four quarters of the globe," and signed "Howard Cantine," she couldn't be made to believe that it was the same Howard Cantine under whose preaching and reading she had sat so many times, much to her edification and gratification. And yet for all her disbelief, it was precisely the same, and he had carried his rather unusual proficiency in the use of language into a vocation that in its bills and public announcements to this day imitates the verbal flamboyancy and redundancy that he originated and introduced.

The church was by no means injured or its work interrupted by the incident, but moved on to prominence and usefulness in steps that were not slow nor uncertain.

"The house" was vacant, and once more Mrs. Obed Bunn appealed to her husband to know what was the matter with Dandy. "He came home late the other night," she said, "making the most horrible sounds and pointing constantly toward the north. I *know* he tried to say something and it seemed to me to sound like 'Vile.' I said over her name to him three or four times and he must have



caught onto it, for he nodded and shook himself, and kept pointing and shaking his finger toward the north. I wonder has he seen her, and if she's coming back to torture me."

But was "the house" vacant?

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## CHAPTER XV.

### WHAT CATLIN SAW THAT WAS NOT A SHADOW.

CATLIN'S life had ceased to be any living worthy of the name. His home to him ceased to be a home. He had gone to his house the morning after his interview with Cantine and had said to Alice: "He is to leave the Point and will not bother you again." He said no more, but, until he saw the boat with all of the minister's effects and family float off down the river, he kept Alice so closely under his eye that he knew the two unhappy and guilty persons never again met. He provided for her and the children as he had done and as well as he was able, but never sat at meals with them and very infrequently was in the house during the night. Sometimes he took his children with him for walks through the valley, looking at them with a mournful interest and sitting down, gathering them in his arms.

"What makes father sometimes hug us up to him and cry?" asked one of them once of the mother, and adding: "Why don't he come home and stay with us as he used to do?"



"Hush!" replied Alice. "Don't ask such questions of any one. Your father is unhappy."

"Are we happy, mamma?" pursued the little one.

But the inquiries were closed with a look.

Total separations of husband and wife by means of an appeal to the law were unknown in those days, and the peace of whole families, not to say communities, was seldom broken by such actions, being kept whole by the suffering, silence and misery of one.

Catlin's comfort was in "the house." He gave it without ceasing his unremitting attention. He was not unconscious that it was tenanted by something or somebody. But he could find nothing.

"I planned and built this house myself," he said to himself; "I know every nook and cranny in it, but here is something or somebody, whatever it is, that knows more about it than I do."

He repeatedly searched it from cellar to attic, but discovered nothing. He thought he repeatedly saw evidences of an occupancy by those that were far from being disembodied spirits; doors opened or unlatched that he had made sure he had firmly fastened; marks on the walls that had not been there at his last visit; shelves pulled down and disarranged; even doors taken off their hinges and window sash removed, as though to leave unmistakable signs that real flesh and blood had been there and active.

He had abundant proof in his own mind of his suspicions and belief but once. And yet, after all, the result was no proof, for he established nothing. Coming toward the house one evening just as the



sun was setting, he was admiring, as he always did, the graceful contour of the structure. The broken sky line of the roof was his delight. He knew every inch of it. But this time there was an addition to it not fashioned by his genius. On the peak of the central portion of the roof stood a slight figure, and clear and distinct in the light of the setting sun as a silhouette the figure of a girl in scanty garments, with long, trailing black hair! Catlin stopped, fairly transfixed, and for a moment or two watched. The figure stood for a time as silent and unmoved as one of the chimneys or pinnacles of the roof. Except for its rude appearance it might have been taken for one of the ornaments of the house. As he looked, it slowly moved around, facing in every direction, and when toward the west the arms were raised high in the air as worshipers are said to do who prostrate themselves before their deity. Surprised at first at the spectacle, now that the mystery was solved for him, Catlin determined to capture its moving cause. He crept as quietly as he could in the shadows toward "the house," opened noiselessly the front door and proceeded just as noiselessly up the stairway. As he reached the first landing there came a crash that startled and stopped him. It was evidently from the very top of the house. It seemed to him as it echoed through the empty rooms just like one sharp peal of thunder bursting in the air and rolling around in the heavens. The utter silence that followed was none the less appalling.

But with the first effect of the sudden crash the surprise passed off and he continued on toward



the top of the house. He reached the attic, and in the dim light there, carefully picked his way over the unfloored rafters and stood under the sliding door that opened out upon the roof. It was the only egress thereto. It was closed and firmly hooked.

“Aha!” thought Catlin, “now I’ve got her sure.”

With some little effort he lifted the door, and mounting the short ladder, stood upon the roof. There were plenty of shadows there that a vivid imagination could easily have made out to be living beings, and where he stood he could survey pretty much the whole irregular surface. But he was not satisfied with that. He pushed the sliding door back in its place, and as well as he was able went over—at least, with his eye—the whole expanse of the roof, trying to keep, as he did so, the door within view. There was no spot in it all that he did not take in in his search, but he found nothing; he saw nothing that was not made or did not belong to the place.

“Can she have jumped down?” he thought. But the height forbade any such solution. “Were there not projections down which she could clamber?” was another thought. He went over in his mind the whole exterior of the building, so intimately known to him, but he could remember no spot where such an effort would be possible or unattended with the greatest danger and difficulty. He carefully retraced his steps to the door, slid it back, and returning to the attic, firmly hooked it as he had found it, and in the deepening gloom picked his way over the rafters back to the stairway.



Half way down this there came to his ears a crackling laugh that was almost a screech. It seemed to come to him from just at his elbow. It was such a "Ha-ha-ha-ha!" as might come from a triumphant madman, glorying in the fall, defeat or death of his keeper or enemy. It sent the cold chills even into the marrow of Catlin's bones; but he turned and sprang back up the stairway. The gloom in the attic was intense. He could see nothing and the silence was complete. The sound was not repeated. His feelings were worked up to a pitch that was almost unbearable. He turned and fled down the stairway and out of "the house," nearly forgetting in his excitement and hurry to fasten the door by which he had entered.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

ISAAC BUNN.

GOOD old Erasmus Force was ready to do what he could to forward the ends aimed at by Aunty Skerrett, but the departure of Mr. Cantine had rather nipped them in the bud and had made their immediate fruition impossible, or indefinitely postponed them. He had had an eye on "the house" for himself and his own use ever since he had come into the valley, but he had subordinated his wishes and the desire of his family to what seemed to be the value and usefulness of his church. The situation of the property had become known to



him through the negotiations that had been had under the lead of Aunty Skerrett, and on the departure of Mr. Cantine he had had some conferences with Catlin regarding its purchase, the only question in his mind being its price, which, with a considerable accumulation of interest on the mortgage held by the Asbestos, seemed to him to be rather high and more than the state of his finances could stand. Knowing that Karkle had had something to do with the matter, he had casually mentioned his wishes to him.

“Wait,” said Karkle; “the property practically belongs to the Asbestos. As Catlin is going on now, he is not able to pay the interest, let alone ever being able to pay the principal.” He didn’t add, as he might have done with truth, that the Asbestos was about getting ready to foreclose the mortgage, and that at a forced sale not enough would be realized to satisfy the claim, the judgment being one that would more than likely sweep away everything that Catlin had. He said nothing about this, for he looked somewhat to Mr. Force as a more than probable purchaser, and knew he was not that kind of a man who could make himself comfortable over the distresses of others.

He wanted Mr. Force to have the property. He was a popular, well-known citizen of the valley, abundantly able to pay all that he agreed to pay, and once in possession, he himself would be freed from any connection with an enterprise or undertaking that had given him a world of annoyance.

And Mr. Force waited.

Thinking complacently of this way out of it all for the Asbestos and himself, Karkle one day sat,



idly for him, in his office. It was summer and his outer door stood wide open. Firm, strong steps were heard on the pathway without and the figure of a man darkened the doorway. Karkle, looking up, recognized at once the face and the form. He also recognized the voice as the visitor stepped across the threshold and, seating himself, said :

“Jephthah Karkle again.”

The hands were very restless as his eyes looked upon the stranger, but he said nothing, using not even the commonplaces of greeting among those long separated. He didn't like the substantial, solid, permanent look of this man, who seemed to take possession of all things by which he was surrounded, even human beings.

“I've been a long time coming back to ask your help,” the stranger went on. “Let me see.” He turned his head to one side, as though making a calculation. “Dear me ! if it isn't almost five years ! And what changes in those years !”

Karkle made no reply, looking at him steadily as though studying him up.

“I didn't like the looks of the property that Colonel Atwater left when I was here before,” the stranger went on, adding, with a very slight smile : “And it didn't seem to me to be worth while to throw good money after poor or very uncertain money. I have come again and my mind has changed. I have looked upon one of the most attractive places that my eye ever saw. It ought to be worth a goodly sum. I have come to you to help us get something out of it for those whom Colonel Atwater ruined. There should be something left.”



Karkle was by no means composed, but he replied to this.

"Left?" he repeated, speaking rapidly. "The property has passed away entirely from Colonel Atwater and is held by others by a title that cannot for an instant be successfully questioned."

"Wait a minute," said the stranger, holding up a warning finger. "We have waited a long time, and not for nothing. What we expect is not altogether in that direction. I want to refresh your memory a little. Perhaps by so doing you may get a suggestion as to my meaning."

Karkle kept his eyes steadily fixed on the visitor, trying vainly to make him out.

The stranger leaned forward a little, as though to fix the attention of his hearer.

"Isaac Bunn was a soldier in the company with Lieutenant Atwater," he said, "in the little army that came into this region to scourge the Indians for their treachery and atrocities. With many others they were attracted by the many natural advantages and beauties of this valley, and Isaac Bunn came first and squatted on a piece of land, thinking to hold it by a claim founded on his military services. He built him a little cabin on a rise of ground and had with him a widowed daughter, widowed in her honeymoon. Among other ways that she tried to brighten the new home that her father had made in the then wild and deserted place, and, in a manner, to soothe her own sorrow, was in the training and cultivating of a few wild flowers underneath her window and beside the door. It was a meager, sparse, pitiful little bed, its chief contents being



dandelions, the roots of which she had herself dug in the woods. But Isaac Bunn's claim to the land he had settled upon and begun in a small way to improve was so slender that, when a contest for it came, it would not hold a minute. Besides, he was old and feeble, and could not hold his own as he would have done had he been a younger man. He had no money to pay, and his opponent, who should the rather have been his friend, was powerful before the legislature and the courts and employed an attorney who was shrewd and hesitated at nothing if he could only win. Isaac Bunn's services as a soldier were forgotten, his age was not considered at all, and he was forced to give up what he thought was his and where he had expected to end his days. He was almost the only settler as yet in the whole region, and he took what was offered him—a refuge in the cabin of an Indian not far from the spot that he had selected as his home. He had sent for his brothers to come to this land of promise, thinking that perhaps with their help he could yet succeed; but for a long time no response was made. Communication was difficult, and the way hither long, tiresome and dangerous. The daughter longed for her small bed of flowers. She thought she could at least bring that away, even if, with the roots, she carried some of the soil. She started, one afternoon, with such intention in her mind, and being gone longer than she should, her father went through the forest after her. Midway between the two places he found her lying at the foot of a great tree. In her hand she had a great bunch of dandelions. He bore her as he could to the Indian's hut. In the morning there were two



forms on the rude but soft fur couch where they had laid her. One of them was lifeless—hers—with the flowers still in her hand ; the other hardly less alive, for whose existence she had given her own. Isaac Bunn wasted away during the winter following, and in the spring died. But not before he had seen the face and pressed the hands of a younger brother who had at length answered the summons to come to him. It was almost at the last moment, and the old man was too much exhausted to reveal to his brother the cause of his situation. He could only manifest to him his satisfaction at seeing him and make somewhat clear that he had been wronged in some way and was disappointed and broken-hearted.”

Jephthah Karkle listened to this recital with unquestionable interest, and when the stranger had concluded breathed long and sighed, but looked relieved.

“That’s quite a romance,” he said, “but more or less commonplace in a locality like this. I could point you to numberless instances hereabouts where it has been determined that military titles wouldn’t hold for a second.”

“So?” said the stranger, somewhat incredulously. “Then there is culpable wrong somewhere and individual action that comes close to being criminal.”

This somewhat startled Karkle, although, except for the incessant motion of his hands, he did not show it.

“But that is not the point that I wish to make, nor is it the reason why I have refreshed your memory with the short tale.”



"Refreshed my memory!" exclaimed Karkle. "You have told me something as new to me as a freshly born babe would be."

"Ah!" said the stranger, "then I will be more explicit. Supposing Obed Bunn should be apprised of the fact, which he suspects now, but of which he is really ignorant, that Colonel Atwater and Jephthah Karkle were the men who wronged his brother, Isaac Bunn, bringing him to his death with a broken heart."

Karkle leisurely rose to his feet, thrust his hands deep into his pockets, walked to the doorway and looked for a moment upon the forest near at hand and the green hills far away. Then he turned, and with a very quiet and subdued air, replied:

"I don't give one iota for Obed Bunn. Whether he knows what you have been telling me or not, I do not care. Indeed, I had as lief tell him the whole story myself!"

"Oh!" said the stranger, entirely unmoved, and then he added, quickly: "What about the property of Colonel Atwater that you two stole from Isaac Bunn?"

"Look here!" Karkle exclaimed. "I do not know who or what you are, but I have no stomach to have any one come into my own office and insult me!"

The stranger was still unmoved, and very quietly looking up at Karkle, asked again:

"And what has become of the large sum of money that Colonel Atwater is known to have brought into this valley?"

Something seemed to have suddenly soothed Karkle's feelings, for he answered:



“The property is practically held, for Catlin will never be able to satisfy the mortgage, and by the strongest kind of a title, by the Asbestos Company.”

“The Asbestos?” asked the stranger.

Karkle was pleased at the apparent impression that the name had produced on the stranger, and he repeated it with emphasis: “Yes. The Asbestos.”

The stranger this time laughed outright, much to Karkle’s dismay.

“There’s no such company,” the stranger said, after a moment. “It went all to pieces three days before I left the city, now more than two weeks ago. It is a complete wreck!”

Karkle stood for a moment dumfounded, and then sank into his chair. The stranger seemed rather to enjoy the discomfiture of his companion.

He rose from his seat after a moment and said “I shall be here several days this time and will be able to see you frequently on these matters. You may think over what I have been saying to you. And I might as well inform you also that I represent the creditors of the Asbestos, as well as those of Colonel Atwater. It is largely through his misdoings that the company has come to grief.”

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## CHAPTER XVII.

## GOOD OLD ERASMUS FORCE AND HIS FAMILY.

GOOD old Erasmus Force stood on the portico of "the house," facing the south, and looked abroad over the landscape. Although a man of grain, butter, plaster and trade, he was of refined instincts and of good taste, and his soul filled with delight over the beauty of the view.

"Paradise could not have surpassed this in its loveliness," he murmured to himself. "One's last days passed in such a spot, he could have little to improve on by a transition to heaven itself, when his time came!"

And it was all his, so far as he knew or could see, as long as he should live.

Perhaps at that moment, perhaps never, did he reflect upon how it had all come into his possession.

The strange gentleman returned but once more to Karkle's office and then his visit was very brief. It was in a day or two after his recent call.

"I am not yet ready, Jephthah Karkle," he said, abruptly, when he entered. "There is much for me to do yet. It is my business to find out things and I am finding them out."

Karkle looked at him with a stupid sort of a stare, hardly making out what he was talking about.

"Go ahead, Jephthah Karkle," the strange gentleman continued. "Go ahead and get out of



it all you can for the Asbestos. My turn will come afterward. This is my second call here. My third visit will be my final one. Look out for it and bear in mind what I have told you."

He quitted the office as abruptly as he had entered it.

Karkle couldn't make it out at all. What did he mean by "his turn"? What turn? And what could it all have to do with him? He took his hat and went over to Ordway's tavern, asking Caleb if he had seen the strange gentleman. Caleb had. Did he know who he was or what his name was? Caleb did not, but thought he had heard some one call him James or Mr. James. He had heard, too, that he was stopping or visiting down the river a little ways, if he was not mistaken, at Obed Bunn's. Say what he might have said, this was not pleasant information for Karkle. He saw Obed Bunn a number of times thereafter, and with some curiosity, if not anxiety; but that person hardly noticed him. He had never heretofore been accustomed to notice him, only glancing him over, without any recognition by eye or with tongue, passing along stoop-shouldered, with a shadow over his face.

The days passed and so the memory of the strange man passed gradually from Karkle, as such things will pass from one, based on only a knowledge of a few minutes. The man himself left but little, if any, impression, but what he had said and what he had told Karkle were matters he could not forget.

And he went ahead. The proceedings necessary seemed long and dragging to him and to Erasmus Force, but they were very rapid to Cat-



lin. When the ultimate result of it all stared him in the face, he went to Force and begged him to take the place at his own valuation, provided it was enough to satisfy the claim of the Asbestos. But Force assured him again that it was too much and more than he could afford or would be willing to pay. Catlin could only watch what was going on, as though he had been an entirely disinterested person, utterly helpless to stop the wheels of the customary process that Karkle had set going. What was the use for him to seek the lawyer and make intercession for time? His only reply would have been: "The affairs of the Asbestos demand it." And where would have been to him any benefit if further time had been given him? It would only have increased a burden which had always been heavier than he should have attempted to carry. He was a miserable, unhappy, discouraged man, and to add to his distress, his two eldest children, attacked with a disease the ravages of which through the valley were remembered and referred to as a date in the calendar of the locality for many years thereafter, were taken away from him within seven days of each other.

He saw the pale face of the mother in her anguish grown thin and pinched with watching, care and grief, but he looked at her coldly and in his own sorrow asked himself: "Is this a part of her punishment or mine?"

As intimately acquainted with the private and home life of every family as is every one in a small hamlet, the disagreement grown up between Catlin and his wife was observed, noted and commented upon in ways more derogatory to him than to her.



Women said : " He is killing Alice with his habits and conduct." Men said : " His home is an unhappy one for him." Aunty Skerrett, concerned for her only daughter, sought vainly from her some reason for the evident trouble, but she could never get a complaint from her nor any more satisfactory reply than : " I have made my bed, mother ; let me lie upon it." And the stalwart brothers of Alice, interested in their only sister's welfare, pounced on Catlin with considerable ferocity. He silenced them forever with the expression : " I can make no explanation. Ask Alice." Thus referred, to them she said : " It is no fault of Cameron's."

Putting this and that together did no good in the gossip, and it was not until years after that the truth came forth, inadvertently, from the one who had had the most to do with making it the truth.

There was no contest in the proceedings. What was the use ? There was no opposition anywhere. And in the end, in comparison with the real and cost value of the property, the sum realized was pitiful. The original claim and the additions of interest accumulated, the absurdly extravagant " costs " and expenses, made an amount to which that obtained on the sale was very small indeed. And Catlin's house and lot, which Karkle had once accurately and, it is to be hoped, unwittingly prophesied would go, too, whether Alice was willing or not, did not suffice to make it all wholly good either.

Good old Erasmus Force bought it in. Somebody must lose by the transaction. It was not he.



The creditors of the Asbestos didn't want to. Karle said they mustn't, and it all fell on Catlin.

The Force family took possession. Erasmus Force, Jr., seconding his father in his estimation and admiration of the place, and Erasmus Force the second continually finding something new to compliment and commend.

But it was less than a week after they had got all settled and Mrs. Erasmus Force, Jr., was able to "find things when she wanted them," that there were curious happenings that showed them there were shadows over every landscape and defects in every beauty.

Mrs. Erasmus Force, Jr., was the first one to notice that, perhaps, all was not sunshine and happiness for them. She lay beside her husband after a hard day's work at "the house" and its settling thinking what she should do to-morrow, and how she could better the appearance of this room, or make the kitchen or some of the numerous closets more convenient. Mr. Erasmus Force, Jr., if not snoring, was getting along rapidly in the direction toward a nasal engagement of that character. He, too, was tired with his work at the store and the storehouse. That delicious sense of passing off into a sleep after a well-spent day was soothing Mrs. Erasmus Force, Jr., into unconsciousness. The room was dark, the windows heavily curtained and all things intensely quiet.

Hush !

Mrs. Force was not so far gone that she could not hear distinctly the sound of soft footsteps in the hall. Certainly they were there. Just as certainly the door to her room was softly unlatched, and al-



though she could not see, she was sure that some one was in the room with them uninvited. Her motherly instinct suggested that it might be one of her children and she was about to speak to ask if such was the case when, looking sharply at the side of the bed, she could make out a slender figure standing just at her elbow. It was very shadowy and indistinct; but what was neither one nor the other was a pair of shining eyes that glared down upon her with a frightful expression. She did as any other woman would have done under similar circumstances—gave a great scream and called out: “Erasmus!”

The snore had been making such rapid progress that the scream and the calling of his name seemed only a portion of some dream that was occupying his attention. Mrs. Erasmus Force, Jr., heard a rush as of the quick movement of a solid body, the door from the chamber was violently shut and then there was silence, except in her efforts to awaken her husband.

“Erasmus,” she cried, “there’s some one in ‘the house.’”

Whether only half awake, or petulant at being disturbed, he mumbled: “I know it. What do you wake me up to tell me that for? Of course there’s some one in ‘the house.’” And he yawned, disposing himself to catch up with the snore that had got ahead of him in his unwilling awaking.

Mrs. Erasmus, Jr., gave him a vigorous poke in the back. “Wake up!” she exclaimed. “There’s some one in ‘the house’ that has no business to be here!”

“Oh! get out!” growled Erasmus. “You’ve



been dreaming. Go to sleep, and let me go to sleep."

"But I saw it," pursued Mrs. Erasmus, Jr. "I saw eyes that were like those of a devil!"

"Well, well, catch him in the morning," sleepily said Erasmus.

"No. Get up now," persisted Mrs. Erasmus. "Strike a light and look about. I shan't sleep a wink this whole night unless some search is made," as she spoke giving Mr. Erasmus several more very distinctly felt pokes in the back.

"Dear me!" groaned Erasmus. "If you're not enough to make a man wish there was no such thing in the world as a woman. Now, then, what did you see, where did you see it and where has it gone?" He was sitting up in the bed as he concluded his inquiries.

"Right here at my side of the bed," replied Mrs. Erasmus, and it must be confessed that she edged a little closer to her husband as she spoke.

"I don't see anything there," urged Erasmus. "And I don't hear anything anywhere. I guess you were dreaming."

"Won't you strike a light and look?" asked Mrs. Force. "I'm sure there is something wrong."

"What foolishness!" muttered Erasmus; but he nevertheless thrust his legs from the bed, rose, wrapped a blanket around him and felt for the candle on the table at hand. Mrs. Force also arose and wrapped a blanket around her.

"I'm going, too," she said.

They made their way in the darkness to the kitchen, Mrs. Force holding her husband tightly



by the arm, where they uncovered the coals that had been very carefully covered over the night before, and with a splinter of fat pine, by means of some expenditure of breath, Erasmus lit the candle. They went into every room in "the house," but found no signs of there being any one anywhere who had no business there.

They went back to their bedroom, Erasmus insisting that his wife had been dreaming, she as certain that she had seen something, and two eyes that were the eyes of the devil.

It was a good many days, if not weeks, before Erasmus was at length forced to acknowledge that his wife was right. She continually heard things thereafter for which she could not account, in the daytime as well as in the night, and insisted upon keeping a candle burning in her bedroom all night long. She heard voices, too, whispers and sighs, telling her "not to stay," to "get hence" and "be off." No one else of the household seemed to have these experiences, and Mr. Erasmus Force, Jr., began to look finally at his wife with curious if not somewhat anxious eyes. Only his own attention became attracted in the same direction.

It began with the tinkle of a little bell that seemed to come from the cellar, then sound from the parlors and dining-room, then the chambers, and finally the attic and the roof. There were heavy steps on the stairs and a rush as of thick garments through the halls.

Mr. Erasmus Force, Jr., was a very hard-headed man, and took no stock at all in the supernatural origin of any sight, sound or occurrence. And in these curious matters he had the utmost belief in a



physical cause as producing them. He was determined to ferret it out. His kitchen girl had made many complaints of the loss or disappearance of considerable quantities of food from the kitchen larder. The bread-chest was frequently short one or two loaves ; the butter was gone and it certainly had not melted away ; pan after pan had been emptied over night of its milk ; a whole ham had walked off or hopped away, perhaps, as cleanly as though it had been returned to its original leg, and whole platters of fricasseed chicken left over for the next day's dinner had been eaten by some one else than those for whom it had been cooked.

It wouldn't do for such and more unaccountable and uncomfortable proceedings to be known abroad or remain unexplained. "The house" would be ruined forever, and its occupation become impossible either by the Force family or any one else.

It is safe to say that there was not a nook or cranny, hole or crevice about the whole premises that Mr. Force did not examine with almost microscopic diligence. The walls were all sounded and the chimneys tested in every way. A watch was kept for night after night, until the watchers grew weary with their vigils. But let the vigilance relax for an instant and immediately everything was in confusion and tumult, worse, if anything, than before.

In the midst of it all, Catlin was appealed to for information as to the exact structure of the building.

With all that it had been to him, with all that it had cost him in misery and distress, regarding not at all the money, he only too willingly gave all the



information he could. It gave him opportunity to visit the spot unquestioned; to be near it; to stand in its shadow; to enter its doors and wander at will in its every portion. As he came near it, it seemed to wrap him in an embrace from which he could not escape and from which he did not care to escape. Sometimes it was to him a great ogre or giant that held out its arms to devour or destroy him; sometimes a gentle lover that soothed, caressed and comforted him; sometimes so much a part of himself that, as he breathed, it seemed to breathe; as he smiled, it seemed to smile; as he wept, it seemed to weep. To him it was a living, active, torturing demon, or a no less living, moving, caressing woman. Out of his brain he had conceived it. It was he. He was it.

But by his interposition nothing was gained. "The house" began to stand in the eyes of good old Erasmus Force and his whole family for something very much else than the paradise and beautiful spot that it looked.

And it was worse than all that.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

### ERASMUS FORCE, JR., GIVES CHASE.

THERE had been a thriving and profitable trade at the store all the winter long, and the storehouse on the bank of the river was almost bursting with the cereal riches and other products of the valley. There was no shadow there or any events that could not be explained.



The Force ark, begun not far off up the river during the "January thaw," when its shape was laid out, was rapidly approaching completion when the winter gave signs of becoming tired and breaking up. The ark was only a great box, without cover, about two hundred feet long and twenty feet wide, made of pine plank, these being sold at good prices at the market where the cargo they transported was disposed of. It was all like baking a cake in a dish and after it was done you could eat the dish as well as the cake and find them both palatable.

The sides were between five and six feet high, but, unlike the vessel from which it got its name, it was not "pitched without and within," but was only pitched without and made water-tight on the bottom and sides. Fore and aft were rigged immense paddles, the handles being pine spars of fifty or sixty feet in length, and the blades that dipped into the water were twenty feet long by six feet broad. Each paddle manned by four or six stalwart fellows, and acting in unison, guided the vessel with a directness, force and rapidity that made them all laugh at the apparent dangers of the swollen and rapidly flowing river.

In the center of the boat was built the cabin where the crew slept when off watch and where their meals were prepared and eaten.

No such spectacles are seen these days as were afforded by the arks of that period, interesting and exhilarating then from their infrequency, being possible only twice a year—in the spring and the fall freshets. The river itself, swollen from a slow, turgid, shallow stream of the summer or winter to



four times its size in width and depth, was no common sight as it rolled in a resistless current through the valley toward the sea. It possessed another interest, too, in being the only means by which the people of the locality communicated with the outer world and found a market for their produce. It was the means of a semi-annual touch with the rest of mankind that was thrilling and exciting and cannot well be appreciated now when every one everywhere is in constant and instant communication with every one everywhere else.

The Force ark was built and loaded, held to the bank by two stout lines, one at the bow, another at the stern. Its chief cargo was made up of nearly twenty thousand bushels of wheat, and besides that large quantities of other grain—rye, barley, buckwheat and oats. There were butter and cheese, plaster and salt, and good old Erasmus Force stood upon the bank regarding with satisfaction the prospect of the return that the vessel and its contents would bring to him.

He had been laboring all day with his men. There was need of haste, for all the signs were that the breaking up of the winter was near at hand. For two or three days the sun had been sending down rays that melted the snow so rapidly that on the hills the brown earth was beginning to show itself in broad and ever-enlarging patches. Much of the ice had been lifted by the rising waters, and there began to be signs of a rain that would turn the heavy snows of the winter all the more rapidly into water. The river might come up with appalling suddenness; such things had been known; it might spring to bank full within the short space of



time intervening between sundown and sunrise. Extreme watchfulness was needed. The flush and freshness of the flood must be taken. The earliest to reach the market were the surest of the most profit. But Erasmus Force did not fear. For a good many years he had been engaged in just such operations. He had large interests involved. The ark held the greater part of the possessions that he and his family could call their own. Safely landed in the market, he and they would be twice as well off as they were a six months before.

He was interested, but he was neither anxious nor apprehensive.

Why should he be?

He had a pilot of more than a quarter of a century's experience, who knew the river to tide water as though it was a stream in his own doorway, and his crew were all careful, sober, trustworthy men. Besides, was not his son to be there when the lines were cast off, and was he not to accompany the ark to its destination?

He looked down upon his boat and the treasures it carried with complacency and anticipations of the result. He was very tired, for since daybreak he had been on the ground watching the loading and sometimes bearing a hand as it proceeded. As he walked toward his home he noticed that the heavens were thickly clouded, and before he reached it the rain was falling, coming at first in thin drops, like an exaggerated mist, and at length in great handfuls, as it were. The wind was rising, too.

It was some time before Erasmus Force, Jr., followed his father from the store. He came in



dripping wet from the storm and shook himself like a dog.

"The river begins to rise, father," he said. "We'll be off in the morning, I think."

He had left faithful men to watch in their interests and to give him warning in case of need. In warm, dry clothing he sat a few moments afterward taking his meal and anticipating the pleasure that his coming journey would bring him, all the more pleasant from the probable profits. As he sat there, rugged, hearty, hopeful and rosy, broad-shouldered and large, he looked fit to cope with any force, element or opposition that might be brought against him, and the pose of his head with its broad, open brow indicated that he lacked neither will, courage nor mental activity and shrewdness to back up and direct his physical powers.

He needed them all before he saw another morning's light.

His first strong sleep had not passed entirely when he awoke for no especial reason that seemed to have touched him personally. The candle that his wife insisted should be lit every night was sputtering away in its final fitful gleams, and a draught of air was blowing across his face toward it from the door to the hall, and he knew he had carefully closed the door when he had come up to bed. He looked in that direction and saw standing in the doorway, with the darkness behind it for a background throwing it out into stronger relief, a tall, slender figure, with flowing black hair enveloping it, and glowing eyes.

"Who are you and what do you want?" he cried.



The figure threw its head back, making no reply except a low gurgling laugh, vanishing then into the darkness behind it. Erasmus Force was quick and active. He was out of bed and standing in the doorway himself in an instant. He thought he saw and heard something descending the stairway. This that he had seen, unusual and peculiar as it might have been, was no specter nor apparition, but something real, something that if he could get his hands on he felt he could hold and that would not melt away in his grasp or vanish into air. He followed on behind what he saw and heard, not slowly and cautiously, but swiftly and eagerly. His pride and strength were awake and active. He was going to solve this mystery now.

He sprang down the stairway three steps at a time and stood in the broad hall below. There was not a sound and he could see nothing. But in the darkness, if there was anything moving, he could not fail to observe it, by the disturbance and displacement of the gloom, if for no other reason. He stepped carefully toward the door of the front room and looked in, resting his hand on the casing of the doorway. There was certainly a movement near one of the front windows. He sprang toward it with arms outstretched and grapsed with them only the heavy curtains. But, as he did so, something moved by its own volition, brushed past and touched him. He flung himself around, but quick as he was, his arms only encountered the empty air. It was like a blind man vainly reaching out for shadows and continually finding nothing there. His anger was rising at being so constantly and easily eluded. He tried to penetrate the gloom



with his gaze, but could make out nothing. If he only had a light ! But to get one now would be to let, whatever it was, escape, and he was ripe for the chase. He went into every room on the floor, going into every corner, carefully closing each door behind him as he passed along and turning the key in the lock. He stood, at length, at the foot of the broad stairway leading to the second floor, chagrined, if not provoked, at his fruitless endeavors. He raised his eyes and at the top of the stairway he was sure that he made out a figure standing as though looking down upon him in contempt. With less than half a dozen jumps, he stood at the top of the flight. There was nothing there. He could make out that every door in the hall was closed. He heard a movement on the floor above, and in another instant he had mounted the stairs leading thereto. The door to the attic stood wide open !

“Aha !” said Erasmus Force to himself, “now I have got you !”

He closed the door, turned the key in the lock and took it in his hand. Then he stepped into his bedroom, lighted a fresh candle from the one that had not yet expired and came back. Unlocking and opening the door, he ascended the stairway to the attic. The unfloored and rough rafters did not appeal to his bare feet. He cast the rays of his light in this and that direction, but he could see nothing.

“To-morrow,” he said, “this place shall have a search that will leave not a square inch of space unexamined.”

He descended the stairway, closing and locking



the door and taking the key with him. He was not even satisfied with this, and he did not go back again to his bed until he had descended to the kitchen, once more returning with hammer and nails, nailed up the door with a tightness that forbade the probability of any human being descending from above without breaking it down or bursting it off its hinges.

As he laid his head upon his pillow it was the last thought in his mind as he fell asleep, that at length, on the morrow, he would know what it was that had been disturbing his household for so long a time. He had located, without question, the source of all the annoyance. It could not escape him now.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE ARK FLOATS AWAY DOWN STREAM.

THE storm without had continued. There was but little wind, but the waters had descended in a continuous outpour, as though the windows of heaven had indeed been opened.

There was darkness yet over the face of the earth, but in the east there began to be some faint glimmer indicating the approach of day. It was not much, and hardly made an impression on the clouds and rain. But it was there.

Again Erasmus Force awakened suddenly and listened. He assuredly heard, above the noise and rush of the rain, rattling and pounding and loud cries. The impotent chase and effort of the night before and the measures he had taken to put an



end, as he thought, to the trouble were still in his mind. As he sat up in bed to listen more closely, he swore a round oath and pressed his teeth hard together. It was too much. As though to emphasize his failure the noises were more distinct and the cries more eager and earnest than ever. Hardly awake, he could not at first make out the locality of the sounds, but felt sure that they did not come from above, which made him all the more angry. He arose from his bed with a spring, and taking the candle, went into the hall to have a look at the attic door. It was just as firm and immovable as he had intended to make it and as he had left it.

Now the pounding and the cries increased, and determined themselves as coming from below and approaching. Erasmus Force went to the stairway and began to descend. A stout breath of cold, moist air caught him half way down, and in his unclad condition sent a shiver through his frame. He could make out the cries now, and the noise was like one pounding with his fist on a door. The cry was: "Mr. Force! Ho! Mr. Force! Wake up!" This at length was something human and intelligible, but the clear and unmistakable return to what was undoubtedly real and human was almost as much of a surprise and shock as had been the appearance of something suspiciously unnatural and not to be readily understood.

Erasmus descended the stairway and walked through the broad hall to the door at the rear. He tried to open it, remembered his having locked it, and then, with an irritated expression, turned the key and flung it open.



Bony Sam Tyler, in a ragged wolf-robe overcoat, dripping with wet, stood there holding a lantern in his hand and his jaws just open to cry again.

“What the devil do you want, and how in the old Harry did you get into ‘the house’?” exclaimed Erasmus Force, Jr.

“I just walked in,” said Sam, “because the door was open, and I guess every outside door in your house is open!”

Erasmus Force felt very perceptibly that the man had spoken accurately, for with the opening of the door a strong draught was circulating with chilly freedom around his bare legs.

He turned toward the front of “the house,” and sure enough, the main door there was wide open.

He ran thither quickly and closed it, with curious thoughts revolving in his mind. He didn’t have time to consider them, though, for as he returned Sam continued in explanation:

“I’ve been helping Jonas Barnard watch the ark all night. The river is rising, he says, a foot a minute. He wants you to come down right away, as you ought to push off by daybreak. We’ve had to ease up the lines four times in the last hour, and the ice is beginning to come down. He’s looking to have that go out, and then to go himself.”

The strange noises, the nailed-up door, everything vanished from the mind of Erasmus Force at this intelligence. It was business there now. Something tangible to tackle, as he had often expressed it before.

He woke his wife, told her while he dressed of the matter, that probably he might not be home



again until he returned from his trip, and followed Bony Sam back to the bank of the river against which the ark lay.

The rain was still descending in torrents, and men were standing here and there in the midst of it with lanterns in their hands that blinked and seemed to wink between the drops. Some stood by the thick posts to which the lines from the ark were tied, watching the heavy strain on them and ready to ease them up a little if the pull threatened to be too great.

The heavily laden ark was tossing like a feather upon the disturbed waters, for the river had risen with very great rapidity and was yet coming up at an unprecedented rate.

"I never saw anything like this before," said Jonas Barnard to Erasmus Force, as Force came down the bank and stood by his side. "I do not understand it. The ice should have gone out hours ago. It must be stuck above somewhere. We ought to be off to catch the flush of the fresh, but I wouldn't dare pull out with the ice behind us."

He tried to pierce the darkness toward the west over the tumbling and rushing waters coming down toward them, but failed to make anything out beyond a few rods away.

"I've been on this river more than twenty-five years," he added, presently, "but this beats me."

They waited and watched, and the river roared toward and past them, still rising, and so quickly that it made them step back from where they stood still higher upon the bank. And the light of the coming day slowly increased. They would soon be able to see by what they were surrounded,



and if any danger threatened, would not blindly have to try to avert it with the darkness to further impede or obstruct their efforts. They knew they could not control the powerful element that they intended to use, but with skill and experience they hoped to escape its threatenings and dangers.

It first came with an exclamation that was almost a cry of dismay from one of the watchers high up on the bank. Barnard and Force looked up at him and he was pointing up the river.

“The ice is coming at length,” said Barnard, quietly, after he had looked for a moment in that direction.

It was coming with a vengeance. Great white blocks tossing in the current, tumbling about like huge water monsters at play, looking whiter from the half-gloom by which they were surrounded, and from their whiteness, too, adding to the apprehensions as all mysterious, powerful objects of that color or want of color do. All looked with great intentness, some with excitement and many with no little fear. Following the current, these huge masses were to them harmless. Turned toward them in any manner and thrown or tossed up against them and the bank, there was no force nor power that they possessed to stop them in their career or ward off the destruction they could cause.

They were miles up the river when first seen, and nothing could be done to prepare for their coming, only to watch them and keep the lines of the ark ready to be eased up on their approach—for their rush and swell would assuredly throw it far up the bank—and then to cast off and follow the great blocks on their journey toward the sea.



Those were the thoughts of Barnard as he stood very still on the bank, half way between the bow and stern of the ark, that his directions, whatever they might be, should the more readily be heard and the quicker obeyed. He felt his responsibility and knew the men under him. To his care was intrusted what, in those days, was a fortune. He would do what his experience and skill taught him to do, to save it and carry it safely to its hoped-for haven.

Down toward them with the rapidity of an advancing corps of cavalry came the white masses, stretching even across the river from bank to bank, high as was the flood. They could hear the crunching and grinding of the blocks as the larger ones, pressed by the top of the current, tumbled and rolled over and crushed toward the bottom the smaller pieces. The heavier ones were all in front, some of them with jagged and rough ends reaching high in the air, making their fall, when they did topple over, more swift and destructive. Much higher on the bank than where they stood came the accompanying flood of waters, washing up constantly and not receding, so unlike any tide.

A projecting promontory at the mouth of the gorge in the western hills through which the stream plunged, having no effect on the current usually, at its present height diverted it to the north, directing it in line toward the bank where the ark was tied. Barnard was the first to notice this, and he saw that the huge masses of ice, the first in the line, seemed to be aiming precisely for the spot where he was standing. He never for an instant lost his head, although he knew that if the bank



was struck all would be lost. He could do nothing. He was helpless. It might not strike after all, and if he undertook to move the vessel, he might move it into more danger.

Not the full force of the current reached them, bending, as it came, toward the east. It was only like a chance blow or the wind from a cannon-ball, but it was enough. Although looked for, watched, expected, the great masses of ice swung up toward them with a suddenness and swiftness that was appalling, some of the blocks rolling even to the top of the bank, where they lay undissolved until an August sun beat upon and melted them.

They seized the ark as a child would lift a ball, very like intelligent creatures eager to have it join with them in their frolic.

The men all ran up the bank, some of them still holding the ends of the lines that had a couple of twists around the posts, that they might ease them up if it would do any good. The stern line slipped up over its post and that end of the boat, gradually and slowly feeling the drift of the current, began to swing out slowly into it. For a time the men clung to the line until it straightened out taut. If it had been one steady pull they might have held it, perhaps; but it was a succession of jerks that the boat gave, tossing and tumbling in the agitated and angry waters. No muscles could be always prepared and strained for such irregular, uncertain, unequal efforts. There came a sudden wrench of tremendous power. Thrice the number of men could not have withstood it for a single instant. The line was snatched from their hands as though they had no grasp at all upon it, scraping



through some like a file or a hot iron, and, hard as they were, carrying their flesh with it. It seemed almost alive, like a long snake, as it glided down the bank, its end snapping as it disappeared in the water like the tail of an angry cobra.

Not much had been said, not much could be said, by Barnard or any of the men, with the pouring rain beating down upon them and increasing indefinitely their difficulties and dangers. Their silence showed all the more clearly their appreciation of the terrible situation.

Erasmus Force stood beside the post over which the line from the bow had been thrown. If we can hold this, he thought, we can save it after all.

Lifted by the ice and the flood, the ark straightened itself out against the current and the strain on the remaining line was tremendous, but it held, and the vessel began slowly to turn again as though to lay itself alongside the bank; but another swell of great blocks of ice struck it, some of them toppling over into it and almost submerging it.

"Take care! Take care!" cried out Barnard to Force. "Look out for the line!" and then to the men: "Ease up a little!"

For only an instant the men relaxed their muscles, and at that instant the ark was lifted higher up in the struggle with the ice and water, the line slipped over the top of the post and Erasmus Force was caught by it before he could spring away. In the semi-darkness, rain, confusion and trouble of mind, when he moved, he was struck by the heavy rope and thrown to the ground. One of his legs was entangled with it. Like a maddened horse, at length seizing his bit in his mouth, the vessel seemed



to give a leap and spring away from the bank; the line was straightened out swifter than any man could move, but was held firm for a moment by the men on the bank. They could doubtless have continued to hold it; but they looked down on the bank and saw Erasmus Force lying there a maimed, disfigured man. Caught in the twist of the line, it had taken off his right leg just below the knee, smoother, quicker and cleaner than could any surgeon's knife have done it.

The muscles straining on the line relaxed for a moment and, before they could gather again to their work, it, too, had slipped from their grasp and glided swiftly from them into the water. The ark, released from any restraining force, swept away from the bank and, tossed and tumbling with the ice and crushed and broken by it, loosed and uncontrolled, gave itself to the grasp of the current and became a wrecked and ruined thing, dispersing that which it had held in the waters all the way to the sea.

They all ran to Erasmus Force, the thoughtful Barnard the first at his side to tie around the injured limb a cord so tightly that, certainly until the doctor came, the flow of blood was stopped. He was borne with much difficulty, but with all the tenderness and care possible, to his home, where instant and constant attention was given him.

But a severer affliction had fallen without warning on this already stricken family.

It was decided not to inform Erasmus Force, Sr., of the double blows that only an hour or two had visited upon him. He should be told in the morning when he came down to his breakfast.



At the usual hour the favorite among the grandchildren was sent to his room. She was gone what to them seemed to be a very long time and her mother finally called her.

She came downstairs in response very slowly, with a strange look in her face.

"I can't wake grandpa up," she said, with a disturbed tone. "He won't hear me and he won't look at me. I climbed on to the bed and kissed him and even then he didn't notice me. Oh! how cold he was, too!"

Mrs. Force sprang hastily up the stairs and flew into the old gentleman's room. He lay there peacefully and quietly, a mild, gentle expression on his calm, handsome countenance. The loss of his fortune, the distress of his son were nothing to him now. "Good old Erasmus Force" was dead. He had passed away in his sleep, painlessly, without a warning, a sigh or a struggle.

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## CHAPTER XX.

### KARKLE LEAVES THE POINT.

JEPHTHAH KARKLE had made up his mind to leave the Point. It had become to him not an altogether delightful spot for his home. Since his arrival, among the very first of those who came into the wilderness to settle it, some fifteen or twenty years before, he had been interested in everything that had transpired or taken place in the community. He had had his "finger in every pie."



This was neighborly and kind-hearted and was appreciated by the newcomers, who needed help and never scorned an offer for assistance. But his incessant energy and movement were not founded entirely on a desire to do good or render a kindness. He wanted an equivalent, a *quid pro quo*. He was a lawyer. He had to live, although there was no person in the world dependent upon him, or who looked to him for the least care or attention.

Such men are very apt, sometimes, to put their fingers in places where, before they are withdrawn, they get sensibly burned, and Karkle first to this one, then to that, then to another, had given offense, until he had gone pretty well around the community and had become probably the most unpopular man in it.

Most of the things Karkle had esteemed very small and petty affairs. They were, perhaps ; but sometimes the sting of a bee will be more annoying, raise a bigger swelling and its effects last longer than the kick from a horse. You may take a farmer's cow from him for debt, knowing that to get cash would be an impossibility, and even if he have a thousand of them grazing on the hills, that one cow will be the most precious of them all. He could have given you the animal without feeling the loss, but to be forced to yield it up was what it was hard to put up with. Have a care, then, that if ever an opportunity should arise, the horns of the ever-remembered and always-regretted cow don't gore you to death !

Karkle was always ready for petty, disturbing litigation before the justice of the peace. He liked the excitement of the trial, the contention with the



opposing attorney, the opportunity offered to fling stinging, biting words at witness and opponent or any one else that came or that he could drag within the circumference of the case. He was quick with his summons for any little trespass or larceny, debt or slander; and but for him the fees of the justice would have been small, indeed. There could be but one conclusion to it all. He began to be disliked by every one, and at length came to be made to feel it in many ways. Withal, however, he had not been unsuccessful in accumulating a respectable property—some land, a few houses and a little ready money. He professed to believe that the field he had been occupying had become too small for him. He had reaped and gleaned it clean, and he yearned for broader, more extended pastures. So he had determined to leave the Point and go to some larger place. His consideration of the subject had been brief, and his decision had been quickly arrived at.

He sat in the room that had served him for an office for so many years waiting the coming of the one to whom he had leased the place. Another came first. It was the strange gentleman again, and as he entered the room he accosted Karkle in a similar manner as he had heretofore done, simply :

“Jephthah Karkle?”

“Come again, eh?” replied Jephthah. “You seem to be of irregular habits, like a comet, coming only at unequal intervals. What now?”

The stranger looked at Jephthah with some curiosity. There was a pertness or impertinence in the remark, of the cause or causes producing



which he was uncertain. It was either an evidence of a clear conscience or of a saucy daring that feared no consequences.

"Yes, I come and go pretty much as I like," said the stranger. "I wait until I am entirely ready and then I move. I said I would come the third time to you—my final visit—and here I am."

"Being here, then, what of it?" Karkle continued, in his light and airy manner.

"A settlement," replied the stranger, very laconically.

"Settlement? With whom?" Karkle asked.

"You," replied the stranger.

"I've nothing to settle with you," said Karkle. "I've settled with every one and am only waiting the coming of the man to whom this house is leased to get away from this valley."

"I'm just in time, then," said the stranger.

"Not knowing what your time is," Karkle continued, "I can neither affirm nor deny your allegation."

"Well, then," the stranger said, firmly, "to come to an explanation and determination, I am come, at length, to claim and to take possession of what was the Colonel Brentford Atwater property."

"I cannot see," broke in Karkle, "what that purpose can possibly have to do with me. At the best, it was never for an instant in my possession and now I have no more interest in it or care for it than I have for the moon. I never was more than a mere agent, so far as it was concerned."

"I don't wish it or claim it through Colonel Atwater," continued the stranger, not minding apparently what Karkle had said. "He held it



only by a rope of sand, and those who hold it now hold through him and therefore have no clear title to it."

"I guess you'll find that it'll hold," quietly murmured rather than spoke Karkle.

"Not against me," said the stranger.

"Well, now," Karkle exclaimed, with his most impertinent cross-examination manner, "I'd just like to know who you are. You have been here twice before this, coming mysteriously and as mysteriously departing, once as representing Colonel Atwater, or his creditors, once as the agent of the Asbestos. I have taken you at your word as being what you said you were, and as you didn't run up against me, why I didn't care who you were. Who are you, now?"

"Yes; I was both of those that you have named," the stranger replied; "and as to them, I am satisfied. As I told you before, there was nothing here for the creditors of Colonel Atwater. I didn't disturb you in the interest of the Asbestos, because you were doing as well as you could for it, and as well as any one could. But I am more than that now. I represent no one. I am the principal this time. I am James Bunn, the youngest brother of Isaac Bunn." He stopped, and taking from his pocket a small card, handed it to Karkle. Jephthah took the bit of pasteboard in his hand and looked for a moment at his visitor with an increased interest, but without any apparent apprehension. He then glanced at the card, reading thereon in plain, black type, the words: "James Bunn, Attorney and Counselor-at-Law, and Solicitor in Chancery."



"Oh!" was his only remark as he looked up again into the face of his visitor.

"Yes," the stranger pursued. "I am Isaac Bunn's youngest brother. Let me tell you, to begin with, when I first began to investigate Colonel Atwater's affairs, and came across my brother's name, I began to suspect there was something wrong somewhere. Further search more than confirmed my suspicions. For that reason, and because the Atwater property here was practically valueless, I made no move to claim it or hold it. I knew what you were doing and what you did. As I have said, your management of the Asbestos interests was all that could be desired. It is since then that my suspicions have been entirely confirmed, and being confirmed, I am more than I was at either of my other two visits. I am the trustee of Isaac Bunn's property and the guardian of his only heir, Isaac Bunn also, known here better as Dandyion than by his true name."

"I can't wish you much joy over your trust or your ward," said Karkle, unable to resist the temptation to get in his fling at the visitor. "Nor can I yet perceive why you should come to me with the matter, nor what concern it is of mine."

"You were instrumental, not to mince matters," said James Bunn, with considerable severity, "in robbing my brother of his property—"

"Now, hold up right there," interrupted Karkle. "At least once before you have intimated what you have now clearly declared. And I won't stand it. I would have you to know that if any wrong was done, Colonel Atwater did it, and if any benefits were reaped from the wrong, which I much



doubt, he alone was the beneficiary. I simply carried out his instructions and complied with his directions. He came to me with what I took pains to inform myself were conveyances that could not, in my judgment, be questioned. All I did was what you yourself would have done, and was to see to it that he was put into possession of what was or seemed to be his own."

James Bunn looked at Karkle with a glance that if it could have been materialized would have pierced him through and through.

"I had thought," he said, "that as you alone knew of the details of the matter you would help undo the wrong done. If there is to be litigation over our claim, you would be the man to set it all right."

"And confess that the wrong was done by me!" exclaimed Karkle. "I guess not. You've struck the wrong man this time. I don't care what is done," he continued, a little impatiently. "I shall do nothing. I am going to get out of this as soon as I can. I'll have nothing more to do with it one way or the other."

These words seemed to please James Bunn rather than otherwise, for the expression on his face softened.

"I don't mind telling you," continued Karkle, "that if you have a shadow of a claim on the property you will have no opposition in securing possession, or at the worst, a merely nominal opposition. None of the Force family remains here. After the elder one died, they all returned to the South from where they came originally. And I happen to



know that they were in very reduced circumstances."

"Our claim," Bunn replied, "is more substantial than a shadow, and would win in the end, no matter what might be the opposition. It is founded on a title and right that antedates any that secured the land to Atwater. He omitted canceling or extinguishing a claim held by another State through a very ancient charter on which my brother's rights rested. He did not go far enough back to find it, and my brother did not know it. I have dug it out myself, and the courts and the legislature confirmed it."

"I don't care what your title and rights are!" Karkle said. "It is all a matter of perfect indifference to me whether you get the property or not. I leave this valley this afternoon. I trust I shall never see it again. I hate it all."

"But supposing I should require you, where should I be able to find you?" James Bunn asked.

"You won't require me," Karkle replied. "If you do, you'll have to hunt me up. I hardly know where I shall find myself in six weeks' time."

Bunn responded not at all to this, but stood for a moment thinking. Then, without a word of leave-taking or any recognition even of the presence of Karkle, he turned toward the door and passed out of the house.

Karkle rose from his chair and watched him to the turn in the street that led down toward Obed Bunn's farm. There wasn't a pleasant smile on Karkle's face, nor did the restless movements of his hands indicate that pleasant thoughts were in his mind.



“Let’s see,” he muttered to himself, as Bunn disappeared. “Let’s see. Count ’em up. Isaac Bunn, Colonel Atwater, Cantine, Catlin and his wife and the two Forces, not to mention Dandylion and his mother. What does it all mean? Nine. Will he be the tenth, and how? He puts his hands into the fire more than willingly—anxiously. I think what I said rather helped than hindered him toward it. I didn’t want to stand in his way. Oh! no. I will not be here, but I shall know. And I shall be very curious to know.”

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### OBED BUNN WON’T HAVE IT.

It is not at all likely that the coming of any other persons ever made so decided an impression on the Point as was created when Mr. James Bunn and his wife, Mrs. Venetia Bunn, came there to make it their permanent home.

Mrs. Bunn was an unusually beautiful woman, and long enjoyed the reputation of having been the superior in that respect of any who had ever breathed the air of the valley. She was a slight, frail creature, but exquisitely proportioned, with movements as graceful as those of a wave. Her eyes were large, dreamy and wistful, which, when they looked full at you, seemed to swallow you all up; her hair was a deep brown, and plentiful, worn waving over her ears and twisted into a tall knot at the back of her head.

Mentally, she was as delicate and sensitive as



she was physically ; indeed, it could hardly be otherwise than that she should have a mind sweet and sensitive, to be in harmony with her person. Some of its sweetness and music she had given to the public in the way of verses that had not only attracted the attention of this country with their rhythm and poetry, but had been commented upon with praise and hopefulness across the Atlantic. She gave promise, they said, of giving to America a singer whose melodies would sweeten and brighten the literature of her own generation and be models for future years. The pages of many a magazine of the day bear full testimony to a promise, not an isolated instance, that was never fulfilled.

She had always had a desire, amounting almost to a passion, to live in the country, on high ground ; and in her city home she always chose for her own particular cozy apartment the highest room in the house.

While James Bunn had been engaged in securing the property that had belonged to his elder brother, his wife had come into the valley and taken up her abiding-place with Obed Bunn. As she charmed all who came in contact with her, so was she charmed by the situation in which her husband was able, with much gratification to himself, to place her. She was eagerness itself to get into "the house" and enjoy all of the beauties it seemed to possess in itself and all the delights by which it was surrounded.

Erasmus Force came into the valley during the time, the only visit that he ever made after his affliction, drawn thither by the hope that a little



something, at least, could be saved from the property, the ownership of which had been so disastrous to his family or with the ownership of which was associated such dire calamity. He had the deepest sympathy of every inhabitant of the settlement, who looked at his crutches almost with tears in their eyes, and in the too evident expectation that he would have to yield to a superior claim every foot of ground that once had been so much of their pride.

He never once went near the place.

"There is that about it," he said, "that I cannot remember nor reflect upon without a shudder. I could not look at it except with pain. It is hateful to my sight, and I would part with it without a regret. If with compensation, why, the better for me and my family ; if without, why, it is gone and we will be freed from what has been to us, it seems to me, a curse, much harder to be borne because it has fallen on us through no fault of ours that we know of."

With such sentiments, he made but little contest and that not a prolonged one.

It was not many months, then, before the desire of Mrs. Bunn's heart was gratified and she became mistress of "the house." A notable event followed within three months after she was fully settled. She called it her "house-warming." The whole countryside was present at the festivities, and there was exhibited, for the first time in the valley, a piano-forte. The arrival of the square box containing it, drawn by wagon from the lake, twenty miles away, had been attended with great curiosity, not to say excitement. Its coming had been heralded



days in advance, and its progress through the streets toward "the house" was watched with interest.

"It looks like a double coffin-case," was the cheerful observation of Captain Nathaniel Allchin.

Mrs. Bunn played and sang nearly the whole evening, first to one pleased group and then to another. It was an event that to this day is marked with a white stone. But the chief joy was when, at the close of the evening, she accompanied the lone fiddle and flute that inspired the heels of the crowd to movement. It added inspiration and elasticity to every change. The sincere and hearty wish of every guest was that the newcomers should have a long and happy life among them. There was every promise of it.

The changed condition of affairs affected no one more perceptibly than it did Dandylion, although, as he could not understand it, so he could not appreciate it and took little advantage of it. He could not be kept at "the house" for any length of time, much preferring his uncle Obed's place, and, better than either, the almost entirely destroyed hut at the foot of the hills, to which he continually made visits. His clothing was better—that is, for a while after it was new—but only a few days sufficed to reduce it to an unseemly appearance. It must needs be so, for his constant decorations of dandelions, oftenest with the earth on their roots just as he plucked them from the ground, did not tend to preserve a neatness in his apparel.

And another one deeply interested, if only theoretically, in the whole matter, was Captain Nathaniel Allchin. His efforts at the tavern were wise



and frequent, whenever he could get any one to listen to him.

“It’s all right now,” he said. “Israel, standing for Isaac, this time has come to his own. The spirit is laid, whatever it was. You’ll remember I said that there was something wrong with Colonel Atwater. Too much splurge, too much pomposity. How has it all turned out?”

Not every arrangement about “the house” was entirely satisfactory to Mrs. Bunn, as she discovered after she had been living in it for some time, perfect as it had seemed to the builder and others. She wanted a closet here, a door cut there, a window inserted in another place. Mr. Bunn himself considered all of these changes to be mere whims, but he was there to gratify every wish of his wife’s heart, and whimsical or reasonable, that which she asked must be complied with.

Mr. Bunn sent for Cameron Catlin. Catlin had gone backward in more ways than one. Of course a most superior workman, when he was entirely himself, his services at such times were always in demand and appreciated. But those times came seldom. He had grown careless of his personal appearance and was not an attractive object on the streets or at work. Some looked upon him with contempt, some with pity, but no one questioned his excellence in his own line of work. For a time after he had been driven from his home, his wife and the one child left occupied, they can hardly have been said to have lived, in a very small tenement on the bank of the river. Damp and unwholesome, it was no proper place for the most vigorous. Alice felt it, and it was not long before, on the



insistence of her mother, Aunty Skerrett, that she went with her to live in her old home. The separation between Cameron and herself was complete.

Catlin answered James Bunn's summons. He was always willing to have excuse to be near "the house," in its shadow, underneath its roof. With Mr. Bunn and his wife he went over the premises and was told by Mrs. Bunn: "I want this done;" "I want that done." Catlin made no reply, not even mentally taking notes of what was desired.

The inspection completed, they all proceeded toward one of the lower rooms to consider the cost and the time that would be required to complete the work.

Catlin stood in the doorway twisting his hat in his hands.

"I can't do the job for you, Mr. Bunn," he said.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Bunn looked at him with surprise.

"Can't?" echoed Mr. Bunn. "Why, what's the matter? Too much work on hand?"

There was a slight blush on Catlin's cheek as he felt the sneer hidden in the remark. Too much work! He needed this, as he needed bread and clothes.

"You could not understand me, if I should tell you why," he replied. "I dare not. I built this house myself. When I left it, I left it finished, complete. To add to, take away from or change it would deform it. It came into my brain as it stands. It seems to be a part of me. Look at a perfectly formed child. Would you improve it by cutting off a leg and giving it a wooden one, or pull-



ing out its teeth and giving it a false set? That is what you would do to this house, did you make the changes you have suggested?"

He turned from them, pulling his hat down over his eyes, and left "the house."

Mr. and Mrs. Bunn looked after him with some astonishment, Mrs. Bunn laughing a strange little laugh that made her husband turn toward her with some curiosity. Perhaps her poetical nature gave her some hint as to Catlin's feelings.

The result was that another man was consulted as to the work. But before it had been decided upon, Catlin came to Mr. Bunn.

"If it's got to be done," he said, "let me do it."

And Mr. Bunn was only too willing to give him the work to do.

Once begun, there seemed to be no end to the changes that were suggested to Mrs. Bunn's mind.

"It looks as though Catlin was going to have a permanent job," said her husband to her one day. "One that will last him for the remainder of his lifetime."

Mrs. Bunn replied only with that light little laugh that had before attracted Mr. Bunn's attention.

All of these changes had, so far as they went, been made on the interior of "the house." It was evident after a time that Mrs. Bunn's attention was attracted toward the exterior. She spent a great deal of the time out of doors and constantly looking at "the house" from different points of view. She would go to the extreme limits of the plateau and stand, her head turned one side, as though



critically examining every angle and point, changing her position slightly or largely as the desire moved her. Then she would come closer and look up toward the eaves and roof with a long and earnest gaze.

This went on for many days while Catlin was yet engaged upon his work within.

Mr. Bunn would have been less the husband than he was if he had failed to observe that something was annoying and perplexing his wife. When he came home from the office of an evening, taking her by the hand and giving her a kiss as had always been his habit, he noticed that her flesh was dry and hot; two very red spots rode like signal lamps of danger high on her cheeks, and her eyes were hard and cold with distended pupils and an unnatural stare.

Not always thus, but occasionally, and growing more frequent. He knew that she had no very exacting household cares, as he saw to it that she was provided with competent servants, and he knew, too, that she wrote much, and at such times was always in a fever of excitement, the creative impulse acting on such sensitive natures sometimes with the force and effect of a powerful stimulant. She was kind, good, lovable, submissive, as she always had been, and was evidently in the highest physical health, enjoying every moment of her life and being a companion to him as close as was his own heart.

To an occasional hint as to her condition, her reply was always the same: "I've been trying to write a little," and that sufficed to him.

Perhaps the great desire that had grown up in



her mind explained it all. It found expression at their tea-table one evening, and came abruptly, no word that had been spoken leading up to it.

"I want a tower," she said.

James Bunn looked over at her with some little astonishment in his eyes.

"A tower?" he repeated, questioningly.

She nodded her head.

"Where in the world would you put such a thing?" he asked.

"In the angle there, between the west wing and the south part of 'the house.' A tower, four stories high!" She spoke rapidly, almost hysterically. "The upper room for my books and my music, and the other stories for sleeping-rooms and a parlor on the ground floor."

"Haven't you got all the rooms you can very well occupy now, my love?" asked Mr. Bunn, somewhat more soothingly than he was accustomed to speak.

"I want a tower," Mrs. Bunn replied, not like a teasing, persistent child, but as though only stating a common fact.

Mr. Bunn looked at his wife more closely than he had ever looked. Her eyes were bent on the table, the long lashes drooping over her cheeks. There was a high color on her face, and Mr. Bunn thought he had never seen her looking quite so attractive before.

Cameron Catlin was called in.

"My wife wants a four-story tower put up in the angle between the west wing and the southern part of 'the house,'" said Mr. Bunn to him. "Can you do it?"



Catlin looked at both of them with horror, standing open-mouthed before them after he had repeated the words : " A tower ! "

" Would you make a deformity of ' the house,' an eyesore in the landscape ? " he added, presently. " It takes my breath away only to think of it. "

Mrs. Bunn smiled. " I think it would complete and beautify the whole scene," she said, " and its usefulness to me is apparent. "

" It is not a matter for argument," Mr. Bunn said, in a conclusive manner. " My wife wants it. "

Catlin left them with a groan. He went out and stood at various points to take in and imagine, if possible, the effect the proposed change would make, and at every spot he shook his head with more and more emphasis.

But it mattered not. Mrs. Bunn wanted the tower built and Mr. Bunn, as he said, was there to see to it that his wife's wishes were gratified. She talked to him in a low, sweet tone of the manner in which the uppermost story should be fitted up—all windows, with nothing to obstruct the view to any point. It would be an incentive and an inspiration to her. Soft couches on all sides with heavy pillows on the window benches, a carpet on the floor, so thick that you would hardly know you were stepping upon anything, and no chair but what was almost a couch in itself. Everything, too, in one color—the hangings, draperies and upholstering—a deep, warm red, to harmonize with her own temperament and complexion.

Mr. Bunn did not regret his wish to please and gratify his wife.

With the heaviest of heavy hearts, Catlin



watched the foundations of the new addition laid and the timbers go up, for he could have let no one else undertake to make the change. He thought, with some suggestions of his own that he could carry out, he would be able to preserve the symmetry and harmony of the whole. Yet it disturbed him more than he had ever been before disturbed, filling his waking hours with an apprehension, sometimes he thought a premonition, that, in his sleep, became terrifying. "The house" was crushing him. From the moment he saw the first stone of the tower until it was completed, he never once smiled. And what was to be the more remarked, his habits changed. He ceased entirely his visits to Caleb Ordway's barroom. There was something resting on him that he could not shake off and that drink would have made only the heavier to bear.

Mrs. Bunn's uneasiness and apparent perplexity passed away, too. She was ever on the watch as the building progressed, sitting for hours looking at the men piling stone upon stone toward the top, or others fitting and finishing the interior. There was a heightened and heightening color in her face and her eyes grew to have more intenseness and sparkle in them. But when Mr. Bunn came home at noon for his dinner and in the evening she took care to have herself decked with the most attractive and becoming gowns, although she seldom raised her eyes to his. He had always admired her drooping eyelashes; thought she looked unusually lovely and seemed to be perfectly happy. He asked no more.

Catlin hurried the work through. He easily



observed the impatience of Mrs. Bunn, and his own desire was to hurry it up and have done with it.

The roof of the tower was a sharp and pointed one, almost running to the height and shape of a church steeple. It was tinned, and shone in the sunlight with the brightness of a burnished shield. Mrs. Bunn and Catlin stood a little distance off looking at the men gathering up their tools and preparing to take down the scaffolding, signaling the completion at least of the exterior of the addition.

Catlin looked at it all with disgust plainly manifest on his features, while Mrs. Bunn, with her hands slightly raised and clasped, beamed with satisfaction over the accomplishment of her desires. Presently, Catlin went in to help or to give some directions, and in a moment or two he appeared in one of the uppermost windows looking aloft and pointing with his right hand.

There is no more magnificent spectacle to witness than can be seen from the far eastern hills of the valley when a storm comes sweeping down from the northwest, following directly the course of the river. There is a wide outlook with nothing to obstruct the view of the heavens, the hills to the west lying low in the horizon. It is like an army advancing with banners, platoon by platoon and corps by corps. The little, bright, shimmering clouds at first are the skirmish lines, dead in the wind, coming up with great rapidity, then darker clouds the cavalry, and darker still behind in great masses the artillery and infantry, all rolling and tumbling over each other with an apparent eagerness to get to the front. And the flashes of light



in these darker clouds still more intensify the likeness, furnishing pyrotechnics that, as heavenly things surpass earthly ones, so do these surpass what man can produce.

Such a storm came, sweeping down the valley. The men saw it, and, hastening in their work, drew their tools all in and clambered down the ladders and stairs to the ground.

Catlin was delayed with some rope and tackling.

With the suddenness of such storms, the rain came at first, not by degrees working up to a down-pour, but all at once with a rush and dash as though the heaviest clouds were in the advance. The sun was obscured, and there was a sickly, yellowish tinge in the atmosphere that made the temporary gloom more and more gloomy.

It was instantaneous.

A livid bolt just over their heads shot out from the doors of heaven, and with an aim as direct as that with which the lightning always flies, struck the point of the tower that lifted itself the highest in the air. It went downward with a hissing and sputter and a sulphurous smell right through timber, stone and floor, carrying fire and destruction in its course, burying itself in the ground underneath. There was a deafening roar, as though the heavens and earth were being torn asunder, and a deluge of water. The smoking and burning tower was saved from being made a prey to the flames, but it was a ruin.

Venetia Bunn had not stirred from the place where she had been standing. But her attitude and actions would have moved the most unsympa-



thetic. The downpour of the rain had torn the hat from her head and loosened the masses of her hair. In the midst of it all she raised her face toward the heavens, and, lifting both hands, uttered the most fearful imprecations. The men within, saved from the bolt, looked at her with something like awe, and dared not go to her to persuade or assist her into "the house."

It was but a terrific gust—a short, passionate burst from heaven. In only a few minutes the wind swept the heavy clouds along, following the course of the river south, the muttering of the thunder in the distance seemed like the insane laughter of some unnatural demon over the destruction he had caused, and the sun was shining again. How could it seem to smile so pleasantly when it looked down upon such a wreck?

The men went into the tower again, thinking of Catlin, who for the moment had been forgotten in the fierceness of the storm and in the sight presented by Mrs. Bunn. They didn't have to look long. The first one to enter the lower floor threw up his hands in affright and cried :

"My God !"

And the rest crowded around.

Catlin had been hurled from the uppermost story to the lowest one, following in the track of the bolt, and lay there stunned. He revived for an instant, while they stood looking. One of them standing nearer, who had stooped over to touch him and see if anything could be done, heard him murmur the name "Alice" twice, with some other word that sounded like "forgive." That was all, and the little flash of consciousness vanished, leav-



ing him lifeless. There was not a mark or bruise found on his person except that the hair on one side of his head seemed to show having been touched and scorched by a flame.

James Bunn could see the new tower of his house from his office window, and as his heart was there where his treasure was, his eyes had often sought it when it had risen to a height sufficient to be discerned. He saw the storm coming up. He saw the bolt and flash as it descended, and trembling with apprehension rushed from the room, almost forgetting even his hat, and without covering ran in the drenching rain to his home.

So brief had been the storm that the sun was shining when he arrived there, breathless with his excitement and his unusual exertion.

"Where's Venetia?" he cried, springing in at the doorway.

"She was there a moment ago," one of his workmen replied, who happened to be standing near, pointing as he spoke to the spot where Mrs. Bunn had been standing.

James Bunn walked hastily through the hall and looked into the tower. He saw how it had been ruined, but it made no impression on his mind. He was not looking for that.

He walked, calling his wife's name, through the halls and up into her own room, then down again into the library and the front room used as a parlor or drawing-room. There he found her, crouched down in a corner, with a chair pulled in front of her.

He was startled, alarmed at her appearance, her garments dripping with water, her hair disheveled



and hanging to the floor and her shining eyes watching him with the fierceness of those of a lioness guarding the young lions attacked by an enemy.

He went toward her, saying, in a soothing tone, but trembling as well :

“ Venetia, my dear love, what is it ? ”

She shrank from him closer to herself, shrugging her shoulders and biting at the tips of her fingers.

Still approaching, he suddenly snatched away the chair in front of her. She flew at him with a half snarl and shriek; trying to get her fingers in his hair and at his eyes. But she was slight and slender, although moved by a maniacal ferocity, and he was large and strong. The cold perspiration stood on his forehead and face.

“ God forgive me that I must use force with this dear child,” he groaned, as he seized her by the wrists, holding her thus until help came to him to confine and restrain her.

Weeks afterward, from an absence, he came back to the Point alone. He was so changed that his brother Obed scarcely knew him. His head was bowed and he stooped. His air of confidence, giving to one the impression that if he did not own, he could at least control, everything in sight, was all gone. There were deep lines in his face and his hair was white.

“ They say it is ended,” he said to Obed after a time. “ She was created on too fine lines for this rough world. Any severe shock, such as she had, might have cut the cord forever that linked her mind to sanity. Ah ! me. What is life ? Better me than her. The world did not need me. It wanted her.”



After a day or two he came into the room where Obed was sitting looking into the fire on the hearth and musing in a melancholy frame of mind, for there was a deep shadow on his face.

James had a small bundle of papers in his hand, and as he came in, he reached them over to his brother.

"What are these?" Obed asked, without offering to take them.

"A transfer deed of the trust of Isaac's property and the guardianship of Dandylion from me to you, all properly executed and needing only to be recorded to perfect your right," James Bunn replied. "I have given up all and everything to you. I shall go from here forever."

Obed shuddered and motioned the papers away from him with a wave of his hand and a shake of the head.

"What do I want with them?" he asked.

He rose from the chair and went toward the window, saying as he did so: "Come here, James. Put those things on the table."

James Bunn followed his brother and stood by his side.

Obed pointed toward the meadows and fields spread out before them, reaching from the foot of the hills to the river bank, well-kept, thrifty and well-fenced meadows and fields that he himself had reclaimed from the primeval forest and wilderness.

"What do I want with those?" again Obed asked, jerking his thumb over his shoulder rather contemptuously at the table where the deeds were lying. "What do I want with those and all this that you see?"



“I have got through here, Obed,” said James. “My life is broken—a wreck. I cannot stay here. There is a pall covering this whole landscape which can never be pierced, no matter how bright the sun may shine. I thought to make her life so happy and—see! The light of her eyes, the brightness of her mind gone out forever!” He stopped with a groan and a sob, covering his eyes with his hands.

Obed bit his lips, closed his hands tightly and stamped on the floor. “There is a curse on it all, James, I know not from where or why, and you came within its shadow innocently; but that made no difference,” cried Obed, in a fierce, bitter tone. “I don’t want it, I won’t touch it, I have all I need. More than is necessary for Cynthia and myself. We have no children. Dandy shall be to us as he always has been. We will care for him.”

With this he went to the hearth and took up the tongs. Going to the table with them, he seized the little bundle of papers, even then holding them out at arms’-length, laying them upon the blazing logs. James made no objection, and the two brothers watched the deeds as they burst into a blaze, burned with fierceness and fell at length to pieces among the coals, ashes and black cinders.

“The curse, if it is a curse; the shadow, if it is a shadow, can fall on no one now,” said James. “We have washed our hands of all title and possession, and there is no one to claim or own it.”

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## CHAPTER XXII.

## THE ORIGINAL CLAIMANT.

A MAN sat fishing one summer day from the banks of a wide river. There was a great bend in the stream there and the swift current hugged the opposite shore, while where the man sat there was a great cove or bay in which the water was deep and as quiet as though it lay in a roadside pond. He was a large man, not unwieldy, but unnaturally gross and heavy, his garments fitting him so snugly that he seemed to have had them made on him and he had swollen in every limb since they had been finished. There was no sign of beard on chin, cheek or lip; but his whole face was like that of a baby's—smooth and round as though nothing had been changed in his appearance at his birth except his size. Dandelions in his collar, sleeves, trousers pockets and hat showed he was the same Dandylion of more than a quarter of a century before.

The lapse of time was shown in more ways than one. The one small fish lying by his side indicated only too truly that the river, wide as it was, had been whipped by many lines and dragged with many a seine. There were more hands to throw the one and pull with the other.

And all about were evidences of the patient, day by day, enduring labor of those living in the valley. The forests had given way to wide fields well-fenced and under cultivation. Looking in any direction and you could see substantial frame dwell-



ings and comfortable barns and outhouses, cattle were grazing in the fields, a four-horse stage-coach bowled by on the smooth but a little dusty road, and not half a mile up the river could be seen the cluster of houses, now a well-peopled village, the three settlements of the earlier times having grown together, with a spire or two in sight, and the tall chimney of a manufactory, all now arrived at the dignity of a real name on the map, a musical name in sound, feminine in its character and somewhat noted for its conspicuous citizens.

Dandylion was evidently impatient in his work or play, as indeterminate, irresponsible creatures such as he are apt to be. He was constantly jerking his line out and casting it in another spot. He couldn't wait. He was interested and vigilant, but uneasy.

He could not have noticed it, for it happened behind him. A female figure left the road there, came down a short lane and went over a low fence just at his back, like an antelope.

Three steps, silent and unheard, brought her just behind him. She stood as straight as a pine spar, her shoulders thrown back and her chin slightly depressed, and every movement she made indicative of a woman in the prime of her womanliness and physical vigor. She was bareheaded; but her black hair, thick and coarse, formed a sufficient covering and protection for her. A blanket, a shade darker than lilac and not quite purple, was flung over her shoulders in the manner of a shawl, one corner of it evidently intended for a head covering, if such were needed. A dark brown petticoat and skirt formed her dress, and she wore



moccasins on her feet. Blanket, petticoat, skirt and moccasins were decorated, not profusely, but sufficiently, with beads and small feathers.

She stood a moment just behind Dandyion, while something very like a smile hovered about her lips. "I hoped so. I thought so, and here it is," she said, and she touched the fisherman on the shoulder.

He didn't look up at first, but shook himself with a slight shrug of his shoulder.

"Dandyion!" she exclaimed.

Then he turned toward her.

At first there came into his eyes a look bordering on fright, accompanied by a low cry that indicated alarm. It instantly changed when he looked full into her face and eyes. He dropped pole and line, springing to his feet with great excitement. He gently touched her hands and cheeks and smoothed down her dress. He flung himself at her feet and laid his head upon them, all his actions accompanied by a piteous low cry or moan that would have drawn tears rather than smiles. Manifestations such as, if made by a favorite dog or other petted domestic animal, would have been welcome and gratifying; coming from a human being, only pitiful, if not repulsive.

"Poor Dandy!" she said. "He, at least, recognizes me. He knows and welcomes me."

Grasping her shawl with both hands, he began pulling her toward his uncle Obed's farmhouse, only a few rods away. She resisted at first, saying: "Not there, Dandy. Not there. I have come for my own and there must I go."

But presently she yielded to his dumb importunities and entreaties and followed him.



What Mrs. Bunn's welcome lacked in cordiality it made up in astonishment, her first greeting being : "Why, if it isn't Vile !" And she called to Obed in an adjoining room.

Obed looked Violet all over with considerable interest and curiosity. She was dusty and somewhat travel-worn and stained, but there was that about her which manifested an independence and spirit that lacked not for means to sustain it.

"Where you bin so many years ?" Obed asked.

"Among those of my own kind," Violet replied. "Far to the west. Far beyond th' Ohio."

"It brings back my young days to see you ag'in," Obed went on. "We don't get sich sights as you 'round these parts very often now, as often as we used when I first came here. And things all about look different, too, don't they, Vile ?"

She assented with a melancholy smile.

"You kinder b'long to us, Vile, you know," continued Obed, "although you did quit us without saying anything about it, or lettin' us know when you went or where you were goin'. We kin keep you—can't we, Cynthia?—just as long as you care to stay. Make yourself to hum." He turned to leave the room and return to his newspaper, where he was struggling with an account of some recent serious troubles with the Creek Indians in the estates of Georgia and Alabama.

"I've come to stay," Alita replied ; and she was unconsciously prophetic in her utterance.

"So much the better, then," said the hospitable Obed, not understanding the full meaning of her words.

She delayed not very long there, not even sit-



ting in response to Mrs. Bunn's frequent request, but started very soon for the Great Plains and the Mound. Close at her side was Dandylion, in a half trot, for her long, rapid strides were more like those of a man than one of her own sex.

As she passed through the streets of the village she attracted great attention, men standing in the doorways of their stores calling to others to come and look; women gazing at her from the windows with curiosity, and little children following a little ways in her footsteps and turning back from her with some little trepidation in their faces and movements.

From her countenance one could not have told what were her emotions as she stood once more on the plateau and walked toward "the house." The whole premises were not a pleasing sight to an ordinary eye. They looked totally and utterly neglected, "the house" weather-beaten and dismantled. The roads and footpaths were all overrun with weeds and briers, fences were down, blinds gone and window-panes broken. It had the pitiful air belonging to a man who has seen better days.

Doors were wide open and there was no let or hindrance to the entrance of any one who chose to go in. Then she entered "the house," going from room to room without any especial purpose apparent, but looking curiously as she proceeded here and there. Then she went up to the roof, and her stay there was long, so long that the impatience of Dandylion became very apparent.

The ancient stories and traditions of the place were revived and repeated on the reappearance of



Alita, and were related at the firesides in the evening, with many exaggerations and additions, all acquiring more or less verisimilitude from her presence that was so much at variance with what most of the inhabitants had been accustomed to all their lives.

It did not decrease the interest in the place, nor the feeling that was almost awe with which it was regarded, to have abundantly circulated the stories that many passers-by had to relate—farmers coming early into town or going late to their homes, and others for one reason or another who were called to the vicinity—of how they had seen the dark-haired woman sitting in the moonlight on the front porch, or greeting the rising sun from the highest pinnacle of the roof, of lights glimmering at midnight in some of the rooms, and of strange sounds that came from the premises at unexpected times.

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

THE OLD COURT HOUSE IS USED FOR THE LAST TIME.

AFTER many heart-burnings, jealousies, bitter words and taunts almost leading to blows, the site for the new Court House had been selected. There had been great strife, contentions and continual effort, but the upper settlement had won. It was far away from the old log structure that had served so many years in its various capacities—as a hall of justice, a church and a Masonic temple. The new building was for the day a very pretentious structure, with a cupola modeled after a Grecian



temple, in which swung a bell. There were tall pillars in front, a spacious courtroom in the second story, offices on the ground floor and in the two eastern corners, with walls inlaid with stone and heavy oak timber, and thick doors of oak heavily studded with nails, cells for prisoners.

The supervisors had expected to have the courtroom, at least, ready for the term of court appointed for the latter part of September, but they had been disappointed in their men and in their work. The day arrived and it was not ready. Whatever exercises had been intended for the occasion—and quite a programme had been prepared—they would have to be postponed for at least two months, and the court would have to sit in the old log house down by the bank of the creek.

The presiding justice was disposed to be very much displeased at the delay and threatened to adjourn the term until suitable accommodations were prepared. He had much reason for his irritation and proposed action. The old log building had entirely outlived its usefulness. It stood firm and stanch, to be sure, but the courtroom itself was in a very shabby condition. Boards were loose in the floor, the desks were shaky and unstable, the doors were some of them off their hinges or swung on one, the windows had scarcely a whole pane of glass in them, and the sash rattled and shook with every motion, the passage of a heavy man over the floor or breath of wind above a breeze. It was indeed hardly the place for the Supreme Court of the State to set up its standard and dignity. Much of its situation arose from what had been considered a certainty, that the new building would be completed



in time, and that it would be a waste of the people's money to make any repairs on the ancient, and, as one called it, "ramshackly" old concern.

But as it happened, the calendar was unusually full and there were a number of cases of more than ordinary importance to be tried. Some of these had been set down intentionally because of the new building. Suitors, jurors, witnesses and lawyers were ready and it would have been a hardship to have put over the term pressing matters in which considerable interests were at stake.

The justice finally, but rather ungraciously, was prevailed upon to smother his discontent and irritation and go on with his term.

It was the last session of court ever held in the old log building, and it was a marked one.

The days dragged along in discomfort and inconvenience, and perhaps it would have been better, at least some of the suitors so thought, if the term had not been held, for the justice was petulant and out of temper from beginning to conclusion.

But everything must finally come to an end. It was on Friday night, at nearly nine o'clock of the closing day and evening of the term. Everything had been cleaned up in good shape and the last jury of the term were about to go out, loaded with the responsibility of the final case.

The justice had begun to instruct them before they retired, that they might return a sealed verdict, and had half risen from his chair to adjourn court, when he was interrupted by the voice of General Mark Vincent from the bar.

General Vincent stood at the head of his profes-



sion in all that region, greatly respected as a man as well as a lawyer. His military record in the recent war had been a proud one, and it was being equaled, if not surpassed, by the record he was making in the courts. He was a tall, well-formed man, with a handsome face and a sweet, winning voice, deep and musical. When he spoke, therefore, people stopped to listen, as the justice did now, and they were never sorry for it.

All courts in those days, no matter what the case on trial, were well attended by the people in general. The amusements of the day were by no means as plentiful then as now, and there was something in a trial at law that was entertaining to the average mind. The lawyers helped to make it so, and, when opportunity offered, never failed to bring out or develop a point that would please the audience. It made so much for their case and increased their reputations in the community.

On this Friday evening the courtroom was full, fuller than it should have been for the comfort of every one present. Not that anything especial was expected; but it was the final night of the term, and that almost always brought out something entertaining.

It had been a September day of unusual loveliness until about three o'clock in the afternoon, when clouds, thick, heavy and black, began to appear in the west, and before it was dark, obscured the heavens. A plodding farmer, raising his eyes from the ground long enough to take an observation, said :

“I reckon it's the beginnin' of the equinoctial.”

General Mark Vincent apologized to the court



for his interruption, asking that the jury might be dismissed to their deliberations with no direction as to returning their verdict. He had a matter to bring before the court that might give the jury ample time to come to their conclusion before he had quite completed.

The justice sank back in his chair just a little impatiently and the jury was allowed to retire. It was due to General Vincent, so the justice allowed, that any matter he had to present should have a hearing.

"This is a most unusual proceeding," General Mark Vincent began; "but not more unusual than the facts with which it has to do. I have taken it up with reluctance and some little apprehension, only within the last hour coming to the conclusion that it is the only solution of a mysterious and troublesome question. I stand here the representative of the people of this locality and of the highest officer of the county. Thrown back less than a hundred and fifty years and a far different proceeding from this would have been possible with a victim ready at hand. We are in the midst of circumstances in harmony with the question I am about to present. The patter of the rain without, the rising wind, the distant thunder audible with its rattling roll and dying away in a groan, these dim candles sputtering and flickering with every draught and serving only to make the general gloom more distinct, seem but suitable surroundings amid which to relate what I have to say."

The rich, smooth voice of General Vincent, modulated to a tone equally in harmony with his surroundings, dropped upon no unwilling ears, the



justice even regarding him with an awakened interest. As for the audience—"bystanders," as the justice repeatedly called them during the term—they craned their necks over those before them and envied the lucky ones who were in front.

"I know not what you can do," pursued General Vincent. "I have no suggestion to make. I rely on the well-known and often-trusted wisdom of this court to find a way out of the tangle, to bring relief and an equitable adjustment. I speak of a matter of common notoriety and every-day talk in this locality. It may not have reached, it is not at all likely that it has reached or will ever reach, the ears of the outer world, shut in as is this valley by itself—but the truth exists. I refer to a piece of land not very far from the spot on which we stand, which should be one of the most prolific and valuable as it could be made one of the most beautiful spots on the face of God's fair earth. There are in this piece of land, I am informed, nearly two hundred acres, with a house and outbuildings convenient and spacious. The buildings are dismantled, the home of owls and bats, the land a wild, uncared for, wretched waste now, grown up with weeds and choked with scrub oak and a tangled mass of briars and thistles. Corn will not grow there, nor wheat, nor any of the fruits that the kindly earth seems eager elsewhere to produce for the sake of man. Before it fell into the hands of the officers of the law, I care not for it, I have nothing to do with it. Let that portion of the history of the place rest, if it will rest. And I will be brief, although I could elaborate indefinitely and conjecture without limit,



speaking from a feeling something of awe and something of horror, that no man without difficulty can entirely suppress, as when one contemplates the action of an element that he cannot understand and knows he cannot control.

“The taxes remained on the place and accumulated unpaid, until the time required by law had expired, when it was advertised for sale. A gentleman from Columbia County bought it for only a few dollars above the taxes, the total only a pitiful sum compared with the real value of the property. He bought it because it was cheap and simply for a speculation. Coming to look upon it, he was so charmed with it that he decided to adopt it as his permanent home. He improved it in all ways inside and out as to its grounds and surroundings, and furnished it with an elegance to which this locality until his time had been a stranger. He was a strong, hearty man, in the prime of his health and vigor. He came with his family one Tuesday to occupy the place that he had made so attractive. On the Friday succeeding he died amid all his elegant surroundings. Men must die, and taken alone, without that which preceded or which followed the event, it was not unusual or uncommon, excepting in the fact that no reason or cause was ever discovered or made known as to his sudden “taking off.” I cannot explain it; I am not here to explain it; no one can explain it. There is no explanation. I am not dealing in explanations. I am relating facts, such as can be substantiated, if any substantiation is needed, by the sworn testimony of any of these that you might choose to select in this crowded room.”



There was a general movement at this throughout the room, and a very slight murmur, easily made out to be one of assent. It lasted only an instant, however, and the utmost quiet followed. It was easy to see that General Vincent never spoke in the hearing of a more attentive or interested gathering, as he proceeded.

“What followed?” he continued. “George Perkins—every one knows him here, I doubt not he is now listening to my voice, was and still is a prosperous farmer—located on the Great Plains. He had been fortunate in his dealings and business and wanted to build for himself a finer house and barns than he had, something more in harmony with his condition and prosperity. His daring I respect, but in his judgment, in the light of what had passed, I have little faith and in his misfortune I sympathize. He hired the place, it was next to his own, while his premises were undergoing improvements. He moved into ‘the house’ and laughed at the fears and prophecies of his neighbors, as everything went on swimmingly with him. His own new house and large barns with other out-houses were completed, and only the next day he was to return to his own home. That very night he was deprived of it and its surroundings. His new house with its new furniture and appointments, and his barns with some horses and cattle, in the morning were a heap of ashes! In the dead of the night they had burned to the ground. That same day George Perkins, with his family, took up their quarters elsewhere.

“Every one,” continued General Vincent, “will remember Commodore Coburn. He was a New



Bedford whaler and had accumulated a fortune in his business. His many enterprises in this valley yet live to tell of the shrewdness of his foresight and judgment. He bought 'the house' and lived within its mysterious walls for little less than twice twelve months. When he was taken from there it would have been better had he gone to his tomb. He was a raving maniac!

"Still another and the next. Andrea Pinot, a French weaver, came here and established the mills at the foot of the hill, that still bear his name. Volatile and light-hearted as his race, he cared for nothing except his work and such beauty as he could find in his home life. Was he a victim to 'the house,' which with his family he occupied less than a year? From it he came to his office in the mills one sunny day and, sitting in an easy-chair there, with no premonition, no indication of what was so close upon him, died with a jest warm on his lips!

"Again did the taxes increase and accumulate, remaining unpaid, and again the place came up for sale in Albany. Nobody would buy. It was literally flung back into the possession of the sheriff. I touch on tender grounds now. We all knew Eugene Merritt. His melancholy career and fate come closer to us because of the tender feeling we all had for him and because of his many manly and lovable characteristics. For more than fourteen years he had been the honored and respected sheriff of this great county. From one furthest corner to the other of it he was known and possessed the regard and esteem of all to an unusual and marked degree. Outside of his official position



he was largely engaged in trade. He had filled his bins with grain to the advantage and profit of the growing farmer community. It all awaited a favoring moment to be floated down the river to its market. We all remember the embargo of the war, a ridiculous, mistaken, ruinous, almost criminal policy—adopted temporarily, let us be thankful, by the Government—and trade of all kinds was thrown flat upon its back. The grain was not moved. It could not be moved. It lay and rotted in its bins. But it had to be paid for, or ruin stared him in the face. It could not be paid for. It was not paid for, except as a man can pay his active debts by paying that great debt that Nature exacts from us all. That was the way Eugene Merritt paid it, and not even waiting to be asked, but taking the matter into his own hands!

“This brings us to the present moment. For two years, now, our friend here, Willard Grissel, has held the important post—the highest official position in the county—of sheriff. I will not allude to sorrows that are too fresh to him, too well known to the whole community, certainly to this court, to be told in detail. Of unforeseen and unexpected disasters that have reached out to him, as it were, from a shadow or gloom that he nor any one else can penetrate.”

General Vincent stopped for a moment, looking closely at the court and then back upon the throng that stood behind him and on every side. The court was evidently interested and all were curious.

“I have been as brief as I could be,” presently continued General Vincent, “and still as elaborate



as necessary, to give this court a clear understanding of this matter, not in the way of attempted explanation, but for a foundation on which to base my application for relief. I have simply to ask, therefore, that this court in its wisdom will find some means to relieve its careful and competent officer from the dangerous, it is too much to say frightful, burden he believes he is carrying, in having in his possession, nominally and really, this piece of property, that, since its first occupation by a white man, has left a long trail of sorrow and disaster clinging to every one to whom it belonged, who came into possession of it or who used it. It would seem that it carries a curse upon it which could not be lifted even by the best and the purest in heart."

The justice softly folded his hands one over the other and leaned forward over his desk.

"This is all very strange and unusual," he said. "The court is at a loss to know why it should be brought before it, and but for the high character and standing of the brother who has presented the case, would dismiss it without further comment or consideration."

"I am aware," replied General Vincent, "of the extraordinary character of this proceeding, but the equally extraordinary circumstances of the case seem to excuse, if not warrant, its presentation. I know of no manner in which it can be adjusted except by the wise judgment of this court. And I might observe here, also, that without some determination and adjustment, the county will be without a sheriff. So well known are the circumstances I have related, so much discussed not only have they been, but others of a more marked char-



acter preceding these, that I much doubt if the Governor could prevail on a man in the limits of the whole county to assume the duties of the office. I am not superstitious, nor frightened at shadows, but I know I would hesitate long before I would accept the appointment, and doubt if I would accept it at all. One can defend himself when he can see what threatens him or knows the sources and resources of his antagonist. He fights a foolish and losing battle when he faces the darkness or a fog."

"The court is at a loss to know in what manner it can interfere," replied the justice. "Cannot the property be given to some worthy, rugged and sturdy man?"

"I think it would be extremely difficult," General Vincent replied, "to dispose of it in the manner suggested by the court. It is a common saying in the neighborhood that 'no one would take it for a gift.'"

"Has there an earnest and persistent effort been made to sell this property?" the justice continued.

"Earnest and persistent effort, Your Honor!" exclaimed General Vincent. "Six times it has been advertised according to law and exposed for sale, and no bidders could be induced to look at it. Our friend here has a standing offer to pay the taxes due upon it and deed it clear to any one who would take it, receiving therefor not one penny of consideration."

"And would no one have it?" asked the court, somewhat in dismay.

"No one!"

The justice bent his head down upon his hand,



apparently thinking for a moment, and then, looking up, asked :

“Has my brother no suggestion to make?”

“I said I had none,” was the general’s reply, “but I have—one. Yet I hesitate to make it known. These proceedings have been unusual, but that which I have to suggest is so much more in that character that it verges on the fantastic. If, after this statement, the court feels that it can pardon what I have further to offer, I will make my suggestion known.”

“After what has already been said,” the justice replied, “the court is prepared for anything. Proceed.”

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

### ALITA’S FATHER DIDN’T TELL LIES.

GENERAL VINCENT turned his face toward the outer door, and searching the throng there collected, finally fixed his sharp eyes on one person and beckoned with his forefinger. So dense were the people packed together that the movement in consequence was very like a struggle. Two persons were endeavoring to make their way toward the bar. One was Alita or Violet, and the other Dandyion. The court watched their approach with curiosity and possibly with some little astonishment. Violet stood as erect and straight as an arrow, with bare head, and her long black hair flowing loosely over her shoulders. She seemed to come forward, not in the usually abject and fawning manner of her people, and especially the women, when placed in contact with the “superior



race," but as though she was with those with whom she was certainly equal, and to some possibly a little superior. Her eyes were bright, and there was in her cheeks a heightened color, as much as her blood could show. She wore a dress ornamented with beads and feathers, over which was pinned a blanket similarly decorated, but of a subdued, unobtrusive color. Right at her heels came Dandy-lion, with his eyes cast upon the floor and his right hand clutching her clothing.

The justice had never had vouchsafed to him the sight of such an object, and his mind was divided between an admiration for the picturesqueness of the spectacle and curiosity as to what she or he, or both, could have to do with General Vincent's coming suggestion. He made no comment, however, waiting for the two to press forward in the throng.

Arrived at length at the bar, General Vincent pointed to a chair on the low platform at the side of the judge's desk where witnesses were usually placed, and there Alita seated herself. Just below her at her feet on the platform Dandy-lion planted himself. He watched General Vincent for a few minutes, then turned his attention to the justice and finally fixed his eyes on Alita, from whom they seldom wandered during the remainder of the evening.

The quiet in the courtroom, notwithstanding the thick crowd, was intense, only broken by the rising wind without that rattled the window sash and the muttering of thunder in the distance.

"I do not produce this—this—this person, Your Honor," said General Vincent, hesitatingly, when



Alita was seated, "in the nature of a witness, for I am not informed that she is capable of understanding the nature of an oath. I do not wish her sworn—"

Whether she understood the nature of an oath or not, Violet apparently understood General Vincent's allusion to her.

"I have only the truth to tell—" she interrupted.

General Vincent held up his hand toward her, feeling the implied rebuke, and she was silenced.

"Certainly," he said to her, and to the court continuing: "It is through her that my suggestion is to come." And to her again: "Tell His Honor," he said, "what you told me one evening last week."

The justice wheeled around toward Alita and said gently, but earnestly: "Turn your face toward me while you speak." He was evidently interested and curious, and said afterward and often that the whole incident was one of the most marked in his whole career.

Alita did as she was bidden. Her voice was smooth and well modulated, the intonation fitting well the matter. She was entirely free from embarrassment or self-consciousness, speaking more as a child would talk, hesitating now and then over a word or its pronunciation, but making her meaning plain from the simplicity of her language.

"I was born in this valley," she said. "My home is far to the west from here. Even beyond the great river. I know not how long it will be my home. My people have been told: 'Go a little further; go a little further,' and we have gone. In



all this big country we who once owned it find at the end hardly a place large enough left to lay forever our poor bodies. From my home I have walked to this spot. Every foot of the way. More than four months ago I started."

The justice raised his hand.

"Do you understand me and why you are here?" he asked. "If so, do not wander. Tell us only that which has to do with the cause that brings you here. Do you understand?"

This was not complimentary to Violet's intelligence, and would not have been reassuring to any one less composed and self-reliant than was she. She very calmly and slowly bowed her head, saying in reply :

"I have come back here to get my own."

"Yes," General Vincent interrupted, "tell the court only what you told me."

"Long before the great battle that drove away and scattered my people from these valleys," Alita resumed, "he who became my father came into this country. He was like you, of your race. He became like us, of us. He was brave, noble and true. He taught us many things. He fought for us. We were better for his coming. My mother—his wife, as you would call her—was the first daughter of the head man of our tribe, such as you would call princess, queen, powerful—to be obeyed. There came the great battle on the hillside and after it your people. Mine were dispersed. My mother died. My father, wounded and sick, stayed in this valley. I was only a child. Your people were kind to him—they were of his race. He paid them back as he could by his influence over my people, stop-



ping many a danger and threatening trouble by quick warning. I know he loved me. I was all he had. Sometimes I can feel his arm about me and his tears falling on my face. I can hear him say: 'Poor little mite! Poor little mite!' He was no common man like these," with a gesture of contempt toward the bystanders pressing up against the railing of the bar. "More like that one," and she pointed toward General Vincent standing a little way from her, listening. "He taught me to speak his language from the first word I ever uttered, and I have never known other. We have been very, very hungry. We have been very, very cold." She pointed toward Dandylion at her feet, as though about to make some allusion to him. But the justice slightly raised his hand again and she stopped. He said nothing, but his face had no sternness in it.

In a moment more she proceeded:

"Your people will be robbed of these lands by people like me," my father said to me many, many times. I little knew and less cared what he meant when he said it. What should I do with all this land or even a small patch of it? 'They will take it all away from you,' he said, 'and give you just nothing in return, or so little as to be really nothing. But some of it is yours anyhow. No one can take it from you and keep it. Some time they will have to yield it up.' One day, as I sat on his lap he took from his breast a crumpled bunch of something that looked to my eyes like a small roll of tanned sheepskin. It was not larger than my three fingers and about as big around. It was tied in the middle with a slender length of



leather that had two long ends. These he put about my neck and tied them at the back into a stout knot. 'Listen,' he said to me, 'listen, and repeat after me what I say.' He held me with his strong eyes looking into mine. 'Your grandmother, the queen, gave this to your mother, your mother gave it to me to give to you. You are the last. You are the only one left who has the right to it. You don't know what it is now. When you grow to be a big, strong woman, learn to read it, use it, and you will never be hungry or cold. It will bring to you all you need.' Not once nor twice, but so often that the words were burned into my memory, were they repeated to me and repeated by me, accompanied by a journey to the Mound and the circle, where my father pointed in each direction to some easily discerned object. I knew not then what was meant. I know now. My father died—"

For a moment or two Alita stopped, as though hesitating as to what was to follow. She took a long breath, and still further straightened her already erect form.

"I was a child," she continued, slowly. "My father's words came true right away. They took what I thought was mine. I watched them dig and dig and build, one stone over another, one stone over another. I hid myself in the woods, and in the hut where my father died. This poor thing," pointing to Dandylion at her feet, "came to me with more food than I could eat and more clothing than I could wear. How could I drive these off from the land that was mine? I was a child, alone, half-wild, half-crazed. 'The house'



was done. I went into it. Whoever was there, I had to myself, where no one could disturb me, twelve rooms therein!"

There was a very audible stir and a perceptible murmur in the crowd at these words, and a sound like that often heard in an interested assemblage, as though there was one pair of lungs to them all and they were drawing a long breath.

Alita again hesitated, but, again drawing herself up, continued: "They were at the bottoms of the large columns at the two ends of 'the house.' There were little strips of wood nailed on the inside, to make more firm the pieces of wood out of which the columns were made. They were like stairs or ladders. I could go up or down as swiftly as a bird would fly. And with a piece of board I could shut myself in, in the hiding-place, where no one could see me and where no one would think that any one could be. But it was all foolish and useless. I was a mere child—alone, half-wild, half-crazed. It was all mine; it was not all mine. It was not the way my father told me it was to be mine. These went and others came; still these also went and others came. And there came one whom I could not frighten and whom I learned to fear. He bolted and nailed up the door that led to my hiding-places. I freed 'the house' of my presence, leaving every outer door wide open to show that it had all gone, and in the rain and lightning set out to find my own people."

Again Alita paused and hesitated, and again the one pair of lungs of the audience seemed to heave a great sigh of relief.

"Go on," said the justice.



"I found them," proceeded Alita, "after weeks and weeks of travel, that made my feet sore and my body ache. I am a woman, now. I have waited. I know what that which my father gave me says. I want the land that belonged to my forefathers and that belongs to me. For that purpose am I here. For that purpose I have returned with a long and tiresome journey. Give it to me. Let not my coming be in vain. He"—pointing to General Vincent—"has told me that this is your great council fire, where everything is made right and where everything is made possible. I want my land and the land of my forefathers, that I nor they ever gave up. Give it to me."

There was no pleading or piteous appeal in the words or tone. Rather a demand that what she asked for was hers by right and justice, an unmistakable belief in the soundness of her claim, an unwavering faith in her father and that which he had given her.

General Vincent, by many an exploit, had gained, as he deserved, the reputation of a wag; and there began to grow up in the mind of the justice a lurking suspicion that his learned friend was in the process of putting some joke or burlesque upon him. He could not, however, believe fully that such a disrespectful motive was in the general's mind or at the bottom of his proceedings. He looked around at him, however, and the expression of the general's face reassured him. He was probably the most interested and deeply engrossed person in the whole courtroom.

"Let us get back to the nineteenth century again," said the judge, and addressing Alita:



"Where is this mysterious package that you say your father gave you? If you have it with you, let us have a look at it."

Alita took from her bosom a little roll such as she had described, now having the appearance of a package of stained and half-used cigar-lighters. She passed the slender leathern string over her head and reached it all toward the justice, who, taking it very gingerly—for it was not a very inviting-looking object—bade her untie and open it. This she did readily and spread an open sheet of parchment, about the size of two hands, on the desk before him. He pulled a candle toward him on each side and looked closely at the document. It was not whole, but seemed to have been smoothly cut from a larger sheet. What writing could be seen was clear and distinct, but the creases in the folding and the natural decay had obliterated much of it.

The room was preternaturally still while the justice bent over the worn parchment. Presently he raised his eyes.

"Curious," he observed, "but not worth very much these days. Take a look at it, general."

General Vincent took the parchment. He, too, examined it very closely. "From my point of view," he said, very quietly and with meaning, "it is not only curious, but also of considerable value. Let me read it, or such portions as I can read. It is evidently a grant of land, the full description of which has been cut away. It begins: '—excepting the Mound and circle and—' I cannot make out the figures—'so many feet adjacent thereto on either side, which shall remain to Queen Esther and the heirs of her body forever.'"



General Vincent held the parchment closer to his eyes and the candle closer to the parchment, in a moment more uttering an exclamation of surprise. "This comes from very high authority, Your Honor," he said, "for down here in one corner is the signature of his excellency, William Tryon, Governor-General of the Province of New York, and in the other corner the signature of no less an exalted personage than Georgius Rex!"

The justice was evidently beginning to grow a little impatient at the bantering tone in which the general had spoken. "Let us bring this irregular and wholly unprecedented proceeding to an end," he said, rather querulously, perhaps to hide his doubt and indecision. "You said you would have a suggestion to make, founded on the statement or relation of this person. The court is ready to hear it."

The demeanor of the general changed to one of sober earnestness. "I undertook to engage in this business," he said, "at the earnest prayer and solicitation of my good friend here, Sheriff Grissel. It is no matter of joke or jest to him, but one of grave and serious import. I regret if I have seemed to throw any levity into these proceedings. Such has been far from my heart or my intentions. My suggestion is that the court issue an order directing the sheriff to convey by deed to this person the land in controversy or dispute, not as to who shall have it, but as to who shall not have it. A very abnormal condition of affairs."

"Is my learned brother," asked the justice, "exactly humane in his suggestion? Would he shift such an incubus as he has described this one to be on to the shoulders of this poor creature?"



"Such seems to be the fate of the expiring race to which she belongs," General Vincent replied. "To bear burdens, hardships and sorrows. One more individual instance will make a small, hardly appreciable addition to the sum total. And, justice being done, or what is apparent justice in this isolated case, it might cease to be an incubus there."

Meanwhile Alita had reached over and once more got into her possession the piece of parchment and was intently watching the speakers, hardly understanding what was going on.

"And the taxes?" suggested the justice. "How will that claim be satisfied?"

"Sometimes such creatures," the general observed, "have money hidden away somewhere." Then addressing Alita, he added: "There are taxes due on the land. Can you pay them?"

"Pay?" was the reply of Alita, with some little indignation showing in her face. "Pay for what is my own?"

"We all have to pay taxes here on what is our own," the general said, with something of a sigh. "Have you any money at all?"

Alita slowly shook her head.

The general stooped over as he spoke toward the sheriff, sitting just at his elbow, who had whispered something in his ear.

"The sheriff himself will pay those if it becomes necessary to do so," the general said, as he rose again to an upright position.

"The proceeding then is in the sound discretion of the court," he continued in a moment, observing a look of growing uncertainty or indecision on the face of the justice. "It is simply as if a discharge



of judgment was entered by order of the court on the application of the creditor to release the debtor, or on the offer of a solvent third party to assume the obligation. It is more than that—simply an ordinary sale for taxes with the consequent order of the court that the sheriff shall convey the property to the purchaser, by deed. There is certainly no one in this case who is going to inquire hereafter at all closely into the matter of the consideration paid or by whom paid.”

For a moment or two the justice sat thoughtful, with his hands folded on the desk before him. Then lifting his eyes, he turned to the clerk and directed him to draw such an order as General Vincent had described.

“I have one prepared here,” the general said, reaching a slip of paper up to the desk of the justice. In a moment more it was read and signed.

What followed, followed with great rapidity.

During all the proceedings the storm without had been like a battle raging in the distance, with the advantage first on one side and then on the other of the contending parties, now there being an advance and then a retreat and then advance. All the tumult and excitement would one moment seem close at hand, ready to engulf and overwhelm them, then a lull and silence as though all was over. It came at length in full force and vehemence, like when an army surprises its foe, just at the conclusion of the proceedings, as though the more fully to emphasize its action. The judge had hardly affixed his signature to the order when there came a gust sweeping against the house and rattling the doors and windows that made even him look up



rather anxiously from the paper where he had written his name. There was a great whirl of the wind and a rush of rain and sleet, a blinding sheet of lightning and an instant response from the air closing together, after making way for the electricity to force itself through.

"A regular witch's frolic," General Vincent said to one standing near him as he watched the judge sign the order, then taking it and stepping toward the chair where Alita sat. She touched him on the arm and he turned toward her.

"What is to be done?" she asked.

"Nothing more. The land is yours," the general replied, and he moved back to where the sheriff sat, handing to him the order of the court.

"Mine? All mine!" asked and answered Alita, rather to herself than as addressing any one, and leaning back in her chair she murmured with satisfied emotions: "My father's words have indeed come true."

She had hardly uttered the words, indeed they were not all completely out of her mouth, when the fury of the storm seemed to concentrate itself around the little building. There were another whirl of the wind, another blinding glare of the lightning and another crash of the re-united air. The rattling windows were blown in, there were the tinkle and clinking of breaking and broken glass, every candle in the room was extinguished, the building shivered and the platform whereon the judge's desk sat trembled for an instant as does a vessel when it strikes upon a rock. Amid it all there was one cry of the intensest agony heard



above even the roar of the winds and the deep rumbling of the thunder, followed by other screams, shrieks and oaths of terror, increased and intensified by the utter darkness and ignorance of what had happened or of the danger that yet threatened, if any.

No one was able to understand or comprehend it all. Enough could be made out, though not by the eyesight so much as by intuition or the sense of feeling, that the building was intact. More than this, or whether or not any one had been hurt, no one could tell. Some had sprung from the doors and windows, only to be driven back by the drenching rain. One man, kneeling shivering and frightened in one corner, was making frantic efforts with a bit of steel and stone to light a lantern that stood on the floor. It was some time before the strong and reassuring voice of General Vincent could be heard above the cries of terror and dismay and the roar of the wind. It sounded then like a man crying to them from a distance.

"Stand still and be quiet," he cried. "Is any one harmed? If so, let him speak and let the rest be silent."

The wind howled and whistled through the broken windows and cracks in reply, but there was no answer of human voice to the words of the general. There was a little gleam of light in one corner. A spark from the tinder on the floor, a breath or two from somewhat trembling lips, a blaze from a tiny bit of paper, and then one of the candles from the judge's desk was lit. At the same moment several lanterns, rude affairs of candle and tin, shot out little streaks of light from various parts of the



room, making the whole spectacle more unreal, unsubstantial and nightmare-like.

There was something on the spot where Alita had been sitting that could not be distinctly made out. Something that had not been there before the fierce blast had struck the building. It looked dark, ominous and big to the imagination in the deep shadow, like a gigantic hand and arm that had been thrust through the window from the tumult without.

“A light! hand up that light! Quick!” exclaimed both the judge and General Vincent. A dim lantern was passed along to them with its narrow door open. It seemed an age before it arrived or could be turned accurately to light up the spot upon which they would look.

The strongest nerves would have quivered with terror, the ruddiest cheek would have blanched at the sight they saw lit by the flickering light of the candle and made more impressive by the shadow rather than the light it cast.

Alita had been sitting within only a few inches of a window, one of the two largest in the room on either side of the judge's desk. Through this window was thrust the trunk of an oak tree that had been twisted from its roots by the fury of the blast and whirled through the air. You could see by the wrenched splinters and fibers of the wood how fierce had been the force that had caught and undone the growth of years. The strength of the heavy logs of the building and the solidity with which they had been piled up was all that prevented the uprooted oak from ripping it from its foundations and bearing it along in its ungovernable course.



The trunk of the oak was thrust into the window as far as its lowermost branches, and wedged there as firmly as is the main spar of a schooner fastened to the keel. And underneath it, mangled, torn and bleeding in one almost indistinguishable mass, as though both had been crushed down together by the mighty blow, lay the apparently lifeless bodies of Alita and Dandylion!

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## CHAPTER XXV.

### GOD'S ACRE.

THE storm had abated and had rolled off in its course before the two bodies were released from their terrible plight, and to do it, much of the platform had to be torn away.

They were borne to the house of Obed Bunn. Dandylion never recovered his consciousness, but, released from a life that was at best only a mockery, was laid away from the sight of men forever, but not from their memory for many a year.

Alita, crushed and mangled, with the vitality of her race that is shown nationally as well as individually every day, feebly, in a day or two, gathered her senses together. She moaned and sighed for hours, not with physical pain, her physicians averred, but with mental disquietude. She was too severely hurt by the shock, too benumbed to feel much bodily pain. It was some time before it could be made out what she said or what was the cause of her complaint, for although she assuredly uttered words, they were too indistinct and disconnected to be understood. From Mrs. Obed Bunn, and the whole people of the Point, she received the tenderest care. If a mere modicum of the considera-



tion that was now being fairly showered upon her had been given her as a girl, it would be safe to assume that she would never have been the wreck that she was.

As the days passed on she brightened wonderfully mentally, while weakening physically; but it was a melancholy brightening, an intelligence shining through tears, not smiles.

"I am only like my race. Doomed, doomed!" came to be known to be the burden of her moans. "We cannot stand before the strangers. We fall at their approach as do our forests. And God Himself seems to help them, not us! Let me die."

She sent for General Vincent, and he came a number of times to see her, his visits being brief, for she was too weak to bear any exertion for any great length of time.

"A wonderful woman! A remarkable woman!" he said to Obed Bunn more than once. "Given education and culture, she would have been fitted for any sphere where women are eminent. A leader anywhere she might have chosen. And what wonder! She comes of a long ancestry of chieftains, men who for their whole lives have been accustomed to command. Does not blood tell in other countries and in other races? Why not in this?"

General Vincent was apparently somewhat puzzled, too.

He came to her one day with a very indeterminate expression of countenance, and as though taking up a conversation where it had been left off at a previous interview, he said to her:

"They won't have it."



Her black eyes, with the unnatural glimmer of death in them, looked strangely upon him.

“Neither the supervisors nor the town officers,” continued the general, “nor any one in the way of a trusteeship or corporation, or committee or individually. I am at a loss, I will confess, how to dispose of it.”

Still looking at him strangely, with a weak but impressive voice and a look like that of one inspired, Alita said: “Give it to God!”

This somewhat startled the general, and the thought flashed through his mind that he would hardly be able to find a precedent from which he could draw the necessary conveyances. But he did not give speech to his thought.

“He will care for it,” continued Alita.

Another somewhat irreverent thought came to the general, that the right of eminent domain already rested where she suggested it should be given, and any conveyance would simply be superegratory. And still he said nothing, for he desired to be of use to her, to serve her and to please her, and he saw how earnestly she was regarding him.

“Do it, soon,” she said, “and lay me at rest there. It is mine.”

“I will try,” the general reassuringly replied, and left her bedside.

He came again in a few days, with a long paper on which there was much writing.

“I have spent much time over this,” he said to her. “I have studied it as I have studied nothing else in many a day, and I know it will hold.”

He read it slowly to her. She understood it and was satisfied. He had added something and



with that she was satisfied also. In the presence of Obed Bunn and his wife and an officer of the court, she being too weak even for such slight exertion, the general guided her hand while she wrote at the end of the sheet, in plain characters, her name, "Alita," and then answered just as clearly the questions put to her by the officer.

Among the records of that county, worn and brown with age—and all can see it who choose to seek for it—is one of the most curious deeds ever penned by an attorney or filed in the office of a county clerk. It is the gift or conveyance of a considerable portion of land "to God and the Dead, and to Him and them forever," and the accurate description takes in as its central point the Mound.

All of these things belong to a time of very many years ago, and seeming to be more from the incidents of vast and vital importance that have piled themselves up in the intervening period. But the place is there still, and wondrously beautified. It would seem that He to whom it was given has had it constantly under His special care, like that other place, "beautiful for situation," fitted to be "the joy of the whole earth." No one living owns or can own a single foot in it; but any one can select, without money and without price, his own spot wherein, when he comes to die, he can be buried. Every one living in the locality and many living elsewhere, who by chance came to hear of the place, have done something or added something of interest and beauty and value to the spot. It has more the appearance of a well-kept and constantly cared for private garden than a great field that is the property of no one. Irregular paths and roads



have been made through it and trees have been planted here and there, without regard to the situation of other trees, and they have thriven and grown. No one person has ever had the care of it or taken upon himself to control it in any way, all satisfied therein to bury their dead, and, with a reverence and remembrance that is natural to the human heart, to keep the surroundings of the grave neat and in perfect order. It was called at first the "Oweenanalita Cemetery," meaning the "resting-place of the wild flower or violet," but the name has become shortened by the lapse of years into the "Onalita Cemetery." In it the first remains deposited were those of Alita herself and of Dandy-lion, and the silent population has multiplied and increased there almost daily since.

"The house" was untouched by man for many years, being shunned by most of those who came within its neighborhood, and by all after the shades of night had fallen. The elements had full sweep and control over it, reducing it, month by month and year by year, to ruins, becoming rather picturesque than otherwise, and it now resembles a great heap of stones with vines clambering over it in great profusion, concealing what might be unseemly or forbidding.

A stone gateway has been built, by one kindly disposed and able, at the main entrance, somewhat imposing in size and architecture, and in the arch over it in a double scroll are the legends:

"THE ONALITA CEMETERY."

"TO GOD AND THE DEAD."

THE END.



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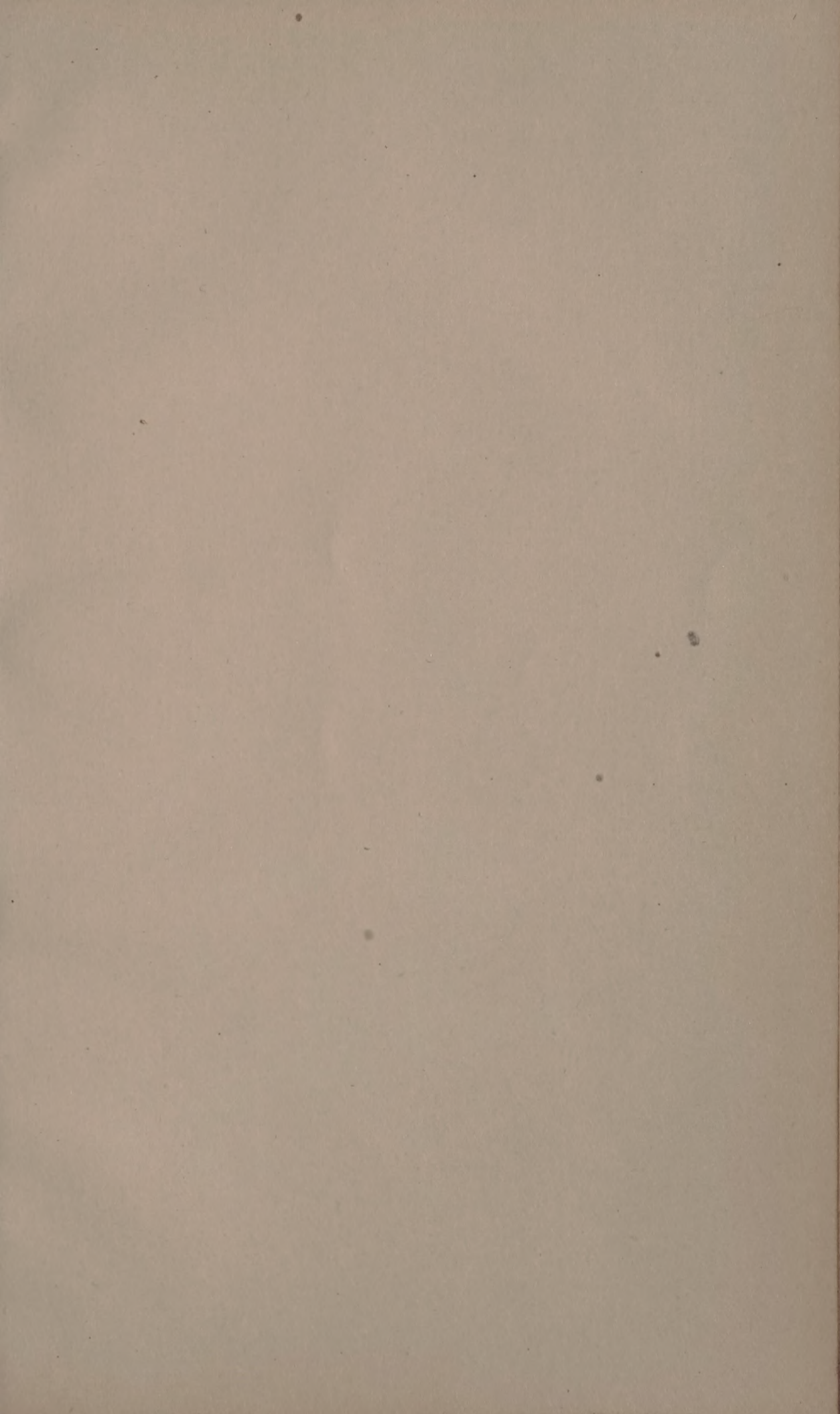






















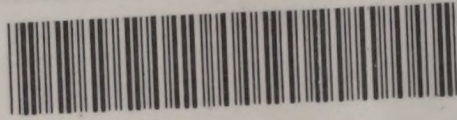








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